

THE BRAVE FINAL YEARS OF RUSH'S NEIL PEART

CAN JOE BIDEN UNITE THE DEMOCRATS?

FEBRUARY 2021
ISSUE 1348

Rolling Stone



DUA LIPA

How Pop's New
Superstar Kept Us
Dancing Through
the Darkness

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Contents



ISSUE 1348

'ALL THE NEWS
THAT FITS'

38

ARTISTS TO WATCH

◀ Japanese British singer

Rina Sawayama is dreaming up a new world of pop. Plus nine other musicians who are reshaping the sounds of hip-hop, Latin, punk, country, and more in 2021.

30

Dancing in the Dark

How Dua Lipa ignored the trends, turned herself into a "female alpha," and became the breakout pop star of the pandemic era.

By Alex Morris

48

The Spirit of Neil Peart

Rush's virtuoso became rock's ultimate drum hero while living life by his own rules, to the very end.

By Brian Hiatt

56

The Revolutionary Vision of David Fincher

The boundary-pushing director reflects on his career, Hollywood's golden past, and its perilous future.

By David Fear

60

Highway to Hell

The \$300 million Kabul-Kandahar road in Afghanistan reveals everything that's gone wrong in America's longest war.

By Jason Motlagh

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Contents



The Mix

11 Julien Baker's Reckoning

After two acclaimed LPs, the indie talent slowed down, went to school, and wrestled with sobriety.
BY JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

14 RS CHARTS Around the World in a Day

U.S. listeners spent time enjoying more global sounds from Mexico, South Korea, and Nigeria in 2020.
BY EMILY BLAKE

Departments

Letter From the Editor	7
Correspondence	8
The Last Word	82

18 MY OBSESSION Joan Baez's Portraits of Peace

After retiring from touring, the folk icon took up painting, using her artwork to honor friends and heroes who have helped envision a fairer world.
BY ANGIE MARTOCCIO

20 TRIBUTE The Ballad of Justin Townes Earle

He was a brilliant songwriter who built his own legend, but he couldn't outrun the darkness that came with it.
BY JONATHAN BERNSTEIN



National Affairs

25 Can Democrats Save Themselves?

Despite Joe Biden's victory, there are signs of trouble for Team Blue. What is the party's best path forward?
BY ANDY KROLL

MATT TAIBBI 29 Forgiving Student Debt Alone Won't Fix the Crisis

Wiping out a little or even a lot of debt won't fix an inherently predatory system.

76



Reviews

Music

71 The Foo Fighters' Pop Party

The alt-rock standard-bearers' 10th album is the most upbeat music they've ever made.

BY KORY GROW

Plus: Zayn Finds His Sweet Spot

BY BRITTANY SPANOS

TV

74 How Superhero TV Took Flight

Comic-book series once seemed self-consciously nerdy, but today caped crusaders dominate the small screen.

BY ALAN SEPINWALL

Plus: The Five Best Superhero Shows Ever

Movies

76 The Long and Winding Road

Frances McDormand falls in with a community of middle-age migrants in director Chloé Zhao's quietly moving drama *Nomadland*.

BY K. AUSTIN COLLINS

77 Paris When It Fizzles

Michelle Pfeiffer stars in *French Exit*, a dry comedy of manners.

BY K. AUSTIN COLLINS

On the Cover

Dua Lipa photographed in Los Angeles on December 21st, 2020, by **David LaChapelle**.

Produced by Coleen Haynes at Maavven. Executive production by Creative Exchange Agency. Hair by Chris Appleton. Makeup by Samantha Lau. Styling by Lorenzo Posocco. Bodysuit, gloves, and tights by Rui Zhou.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: JOSHUA BLACK WILKINS; CEDRICK JONES; SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES; ERIN SCHAFF/ THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

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"Me atrevo a decir que puedo ver el futuro de la música a través de lo que estamos desarrollando y el mejor ejemplo es Rauw Alejandro".

- Éric Duars,
CEO, Duars Entertainment

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ROLLING STONE (ISSN 0035-791x) is published 12 times per year, which is subject to change at any time, by Penske Business Media, LLC, 475 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to ROLLING STONE Customer Service, P.O. Box 37505, Boone, IA 50037-0505. Canadian Postmaster: Send address changes and returns to P.O. Box 63, Malton CFC, Mississauga, Ontario L4T3B5. Canada Poste publication agreement #40683192. International Publications Mail Sales Product Agreement No. 450553. The entire contents of ROLLING STONE are copyright © 2021 by ROLLING STONE LLC, and may not be reproduced in any manner, either in whole or in part, without written permission. All rights are reserved.



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“This is the cover that she deserves and the information I need. I love the rock era everyone seems to be going to now.”

—Summer Jaime, via Twitter



Learning From Stacey Abrams

Every state should duplicate this [“The Power Broker,” RS 1347]. And what if Stacey Abrams was head of the DNC?

—Gale Turner Strong, via Twitter

She’s exceptional and dedicated. Not driven by money, but by helping others. What a lady.

—Teresa M. Kavanagh, via Twitter

If Democrats want to hold on to the House and Senate in 2022, they need to have Stacey Abrams running the DNC.

—Steve Valk, via Twitter

Miley’s Rock & Roll Ways

When Miley Cyrus first appeared on the cover of ROLLING STONE seven years ago, she was still navigating the transition from being Hannah Montana, America’s sweetheart, to declaring her own identity. For our January issue [“Miley’s Rock & Roll Heart,” RS 1347], Cyrus talked with Brittany Spanos about finally getting the respect she deserves as an artist, plus the struggles she overcame to get to this point. Our readers had lots to say in response. “Best damn interview,” wrote Sammie D. Fox. “She is a living legend. I am happy for her.” Twitter user Alyssa wrote, “I love that she’s bringing rock & roll back

into the spotlight.” While Cyrus’ latest album, *Plastic Hearts*, may signal her most overtly rock period yet, reader Kindsey Vaughn noticed that attitude before: “You can definitely hear a David Bowie/Prince vibe on *Miley Cyrus & Her Dead Petz*.” Others were moved by Cyrus opening up about her sobriety. “I stopped booze at 27 too. Good move, not easy,” wrote Jay David Murphy. “In my opinion, she is the most talented female singer of the past 50 years. She is a soul pilot. She is being true to herself.” Reader Indigo Urie said, “She has the right to change and find herself just like everyone else in this world. Congrats to her.”



@matheusphrs:
Born to be a
rock star.



The New Pandemic Era

There are many lessons to be learned from Covid-19. Perhaps the most important/ignored is the climate-change connection [“Deadly Climate,” RS 1347]. If decisive action is not taken, we are inviting another pandemic to happen in the not-so-distant future.

—Matt Austman, via Twitter

The costs of doing nothing will lead us to a dramatically different world — entire regions uninhabitable, mass migration, crop failures. It is far cheaper to invest in programs that prevent a pandemic in the first place. We need climate action.

—Claire Kraatz, via Twitter

SPOTLIGHT

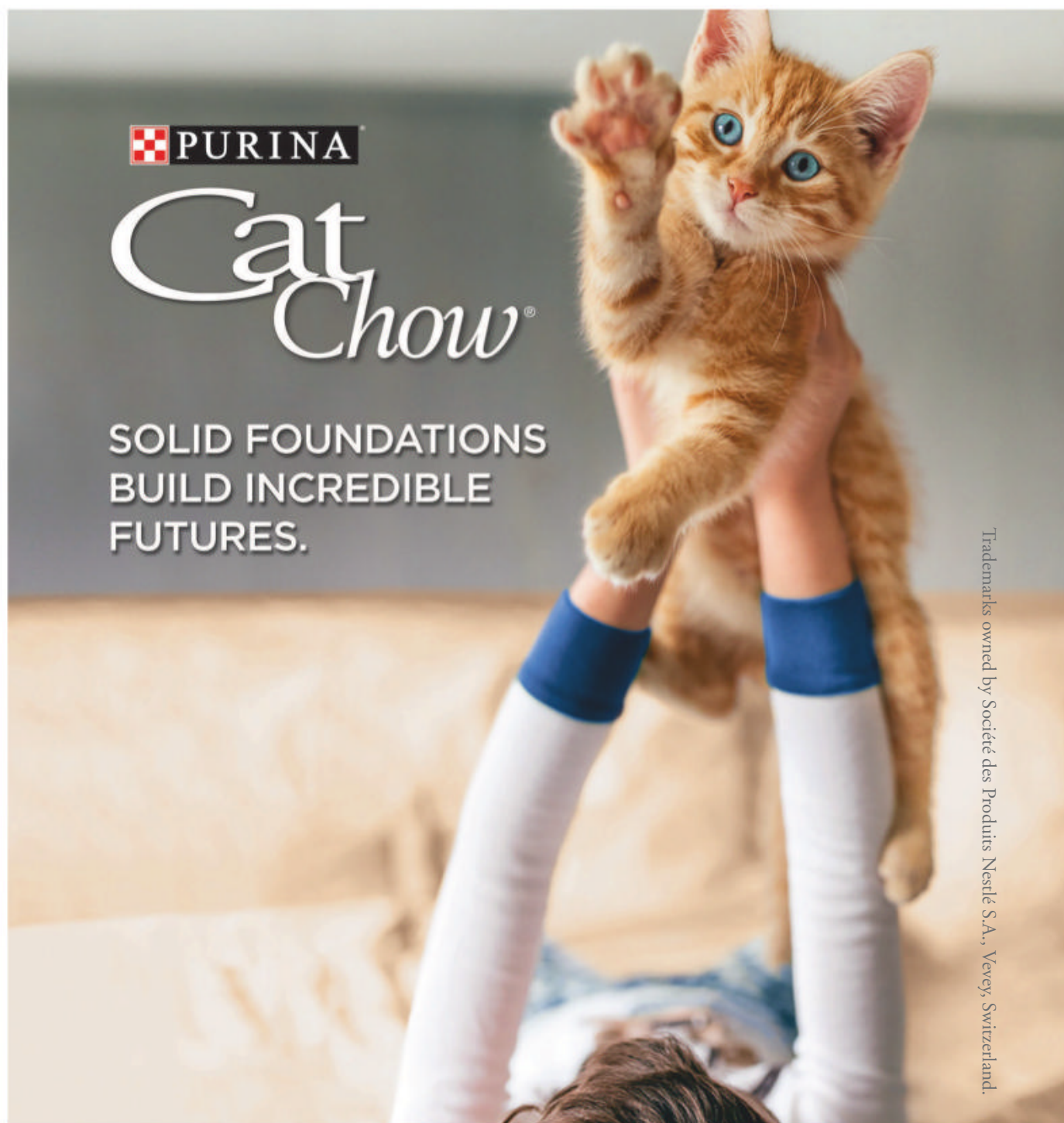
The Best Music From a No-Good Year

Music can be both remedy and escape. This is always so, but especially in 2020. For ROLLING STONE’s “Year in Music,” we compiled the best albums and songs from the worst year. Unsurprisingly, our readers weighed in on the lists. “Where the heck is Hayley Williams?” asked Isaac Romero. Gregory Mott wrote of our Number One pick, “I think ROLLING STONE got it right by going where others wouldn’t with *Folklore*. I was stunned by how good it is.” Robert Reid wrote: “Was curious if ‘Murder Most Foul’ would appear somewhere; it didn’t, but it is likely the most memorable, unique — even shocking — song of the year.”



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Coup Gone Wrong

Fantastic read from ROLLING STONE ["Inside Operation Gideon, a Coup Gone Very Wrong," RS 1347]. Begging for a TV show.

—Ed Habershon, via Twitter

The U.S. insists that its form of democracy is the only acceptable form of government, and will force it on everyone else all in the name of freedom. Freedom at the point of a gun is tyranny.

—Colin Leonard, via Facebook

Underestimating the abilities and expertise of the Cuban intelligence service was their undoing.

—David Mayes, via Facebook



A New Generation of Activists

Such a powerful story ["Building a New Protest Movement," RS 1347]. Shout-out to the young folks bringing the change we deserve. The change we need. Honored to be featured alongside you.

—Taji Chesimet, via Twitter

This is a great article. Very inspiring for our young people and our future. It's really sad that this also brings out the racist haters. They obviously feel very threatened.

—Gerry Peterson, via Facebook

Change needs to happen and young Americans are the answer. Kudos.

—Cynthia Brown, via Facebook

GOT A HOT NEWS TIP? We want to hear it. Email us, confidentially, at Tips@RollingStone.com

Editor's Letter

Dua's Disco Defiance

WHEN DUA LIPA'S disco-drenched *Future Nostalgia* came out on March 27th last year, the timing could hardly have seemed worse. With the terrifying scale of the Covid crisis just coming into focus, and much of the world going into lockdown, who wanted an album of high-energy, dance-all-night club music?

As it turns out, we all did. As disconnected as the album seemed from the moment, *Future Nostalgia* was undeniable — euphoric, cheeky, and defiantly ready to party: an escape, for sure, but also a joyful portent for a time when we can all be together again. The album made Lipa into a global superstar, with more than 3 billion streams (*Future Nostalgia* peaked at Number Four on ROLLING STONE's album chart) and six Grammy nominations.

Unlike her first album, which mashed up pop styles and producers, *Future Nostalgia*'s space-age Studio 54 vibe is all Lipa's vision. "There was a point where I was like, 'Oh, everybody loves a ballad, maybe I should make one,'" she tells senior writer Alex Morris in this issue's cover story. "But my heart wasn't in it. That wasn't what I was feeling. I was like, 'Fuck it. It's a fun record, and it's just dance all the way through.'"



Morris has contributed to ROLLING STONE since 2012 and written about everything from the rollback of reproductive rights to evangelical Christianity and, most recently, the political divisions in her own family (see "Loving People Who Love Donald Trump" on our site). She has also profiled many of the biggest pop stars, including Lorde, Halsey, and Camila Cabello. She was impressed with Lipa's drive and focus, which she tracks back to the singer's upbringing in war-torn Kosovo and her decision at age 15 to leave home for London to pursue music.

"You don't get to the point Dua's at now if you're not empowered and self-determined about what you're doing," says Morris, who returned to New York from her temporary home in Alabama for the first time since last March to report the story. "But culture has historically been so uncomfortable with women and power that there's often been a pressure to hide it or subvert it in some way. Dua doesn't have a pose like that — she doesn't seem to have a theory about her own empowerment. It just is. That's really modern. Maybe it's just her personality. But I think there's a reason someone with that personality has had a breakthrough in this particular moment in time."

JASON FINE
EDITOR

SPOTLIGHT

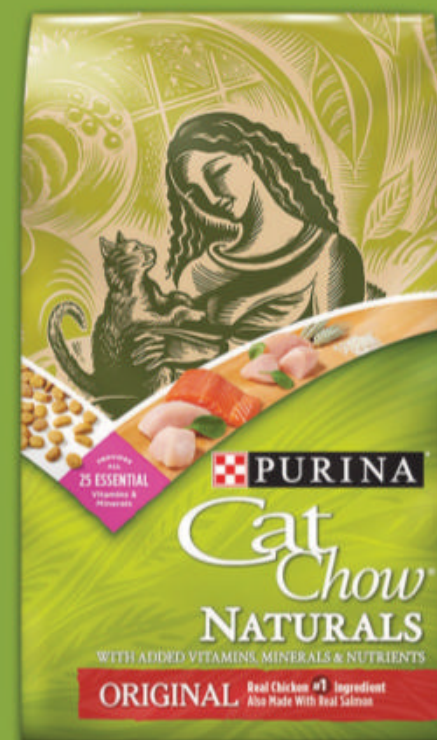
Society of Illustrators Honors Joseph Hutchinson



Since coming to ROLLING STONE in 2007, creative director Joseph Hutchinson has brought elegance, originality, and attention to detail to every aspect of our print and digital design — work that has now earned him the Society of Illustrators' prestigious Richard Gangel Art Directors Award, given to "a contemporary art director who has had a meaningful impact on the field of illustration." Over the years, Hutchinson has worked with a wide variety of artists to bring ROLLING STONE's ideas to life. "An illustration can be beautiful, powerful, arresting, or sensitive, and always engaging," he says. "Throughout my career, I have been a proponent of this art form that contributes to the beauty and point of view of a publication. I'm happy to continue the strong tradition of illustrations here at ROLLING STONE."



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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

An Indie Talent Rethinks Everything

After two acclaimed LPs, Julien Baker slowed down and wrestled with sobriety



→ JULIEN BAKER

IDON'T KNOW WHY I'm telling you the footnotes of my thesis," Julien Baker says, stopping herself to apologize midsentence.

It makes sense that Baker has slipped into full academic mode, talking about jazz and "the subjectivities of language" – because, lately, the 25-year-old singer-songwriter has spent much more time in a classroom than onstage. In 2019, feeling worn out and struggling with some long-brewing personal issues after three years of nonstop touring, Baker decided to pause her career and complete her studies at Middle Tennessee State University. "We canceled *Austin City Limits*, and I went back to school," she says.

Baker was relieved to attend lectures with students who did not care, or even know, that their classmate was one of the most heartbreakingly perceptive indie singer-songwriters of the past half-decade. "It made me use my brain in a completely different way, and return to a daily application of my mind to literature and the study of music and language – something that was not wrapped up in my ego as a musician," she says. "That was really helpful. I am going to sound like a big old nerd, but I love school. . . . I was just, like, hanging out in the library."

After graduating in December 2019, she headed directly to a studio in her hometown of Memphis to begin recording her third solo album. That record, *Little Oblivions*, is not only the most richly produced, pop-aware release of Baker's career, but also her most unsparingly honest in its messiness. If Baker's first two solo LPs – 2015's spectral *Sprained Ankle* and 2017's morose *Turn Out the Lights* – explored questions of faith, identity, and mental health, her latest work is much more directly rooted in the physical. Baker's new songs are full of bodies and blackouts and benders and blood. Many of them take place in beds and bars. Perhaps most notably, the majority of them also have drums.

As the album's sole producer, Baker uses her newly expanded rock palette to tell a story of the reckoning and renewal she's undergone over the past two years. On "Relative Fiction," she slowly builds on a typically sparse and moody arrangement before interrupting the doom-and-gloom ballad with a thrilling pop chorus: "I don't need a savior/ I need you to take me home," she sings as the band swoops in behind her.

Baker recalls that when her career began taking off in 2016 she was "reading compulsively, consuming theology and philosophy and political ideology. I was so obsessed with doing right. I thought so much about these huge things, like, 'What is altruism?' Just a bunch of Chidi-from-*The-Good-Place* questions." Since then, she says, "things happened in my life that made my world smaller."

Baker has not played a proper show since July 2019, and the last time she was fully in the public eye was in the fall of 2018, when



Left: *Turn Out the Lights* in 2017

Baker in Nashville, December 2020

FAST FACTS

INDIE PUP

One source of happiness for Baker lately has been her dog, Beans. (She plans to one day get a second dog, to be named Cornbread.)

KICK OUT THE JAMS

At times, the new LP nods back to Baker's high school-era hardcore-adjacent band, Forrister: "I missed that energy."

LAYING LOW

Baker was rarely recognized at college: "One time I was getting a Subway sandwich, and I was like, 'Oh, thanks!'"

she released and toured behind the successful Boygenius EP with her newly formed indie trio with Phoebe Bridgers and Lucy Dacus. "Gosh, two years, so much has happened in that time," Baker says. "Man, it was not a good year – 2019 was not a good year."

When she got off the road in November 2018, things quickly went downhill. "It was like riding a bike slowly," says the singer, who had been sober for about six years at the time. "When you don't have the momentum anymore, you start to falter."

Baker prefers not discussing this time in detail; she is wary of the risk that her relationship to substance abuse, which dates back to her preteens, will become, as she puts it, "novelized." Eventually, she adds, she dealt with her pent-up stress "in some very negative ways."

"I just didn't realize how much was there that I hadn't dealt with," she continues. "I re-examined a whole lot of things: my relationship to substances and my identity as sober or straight-edge. . . . It was something I had taken a whole bunch of pride in. Then, having to renegotiate starting over from the bottom with that."

She began writing many of the songs for *Little Oblivions* in January 2019. "It's so hard

to be wrong about something you were so sure was right," she says. "I feel like *Turn Out the Lights*, the whole premise of so many of the songs were the two parts of the self facing each other – the antagonistic part and the good, triumphant, idealistic part. It's been a process of understanding those are the same person, and instead of overcoming and defeating this negative part, trying to mercifully assimilate that into your understanding of yourself."

Baker played through her scheduled U.S. and European festival dates in the spring and early summer of 2019, but by early August she had canceled the rest of her appearances due to, as a statement put it at the time, "ongoing medical issues." That July, she had written the second batch of songs that wound up on *Little Oblivions*.

To describe the record-making process, which, for the first time, involved several rounds of demos, shifting arrangements, and more than a year of tinkering before entering the studio, Baker – clearly a recent college grad – turns to a William Wordsworth quote: "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." If Baker's first two albums represented the first half of that quote, *Little Oblivions*, she says, was motivated by the latter half.

By August 2019, Baker was driving out to Murfreesboro, Tennessee, to finish her degree at MTSU, where she had interrupted her studies back in 2016 with just one semester left.

When she graduated and entered the studio, she knew she wanted to make an album with a full band for the first time. But she also sprinkled several quieter, solo moments on the LP. "I didn't want to put out this vibe of, like, 'I'm in a band now! I have a reason to have distortion on my pedalboard!'" she says. "I mean, I am very happy to have a reason to have distortion on my pedalboard. But I didn't want it to feel like a gimmick."

On a strictly personal level, Baker found her time at home in 2020 to be somewhat of a blessing. "I'm retroactively grateful for things having been forced to slow down," she says. But, as is often the case with the exceedingly reflective singer-songwriter, there's a caveat: "That sounds romanticized, and I know there's no ultimate thing that I'm going to find that's going to be, 'This is right,'" she says. "It's been about moving away from the conceptual into the physical experience, trying to be more present."

Baker stops herself once more. "I just made some 'woo-woo' hands when I said 'present,'" she says. "I don't know why I do that. It's a perfectly normal, healthy thing to be present in your body." JONATHAN BERNSTEIN



**STACK IT.
BUILD IT.
MIX IT UP.**



Around the World in a Day

U.S. listeners spent time enjoying more sounds from Mexico, South Korea, and Nigeria in 2020

BY EMILY BLAKE

WHILE MOST OF our feet have been planted firmly in the U.S. for the past year, due to pandemic restrictions on international travel, streaming data shows that our ears, at least, were wandering the globe in 2020. Figures from Alpha Data indicate that U.S. listeners gravitated toward global genres much more than they did the prior year, with particularly notable streaming increases for Afrobeats, K-pop, and regional Mexican music.

What about the overall picture for 2020 streams by genre? It probably comes as no surprise, given the school closings and existential anxiety and all, that among major genres, it was easy listening (up 39 percent), children's music (up 28 percent), and New Age (up 27 percent) that saw the biggest lifts compared with 2019. But the next biggest increase was for Latin music, which rose 25 percent in on-demand audio streams over the previous year – substantially more than the same period's overall increase in on-demand audio streams.

By comparison, rock rose 12 percent, hip-hop increased 11 percent, and R&B jumped just seven percent. Pop and dance, meanwhile, failed to see much increase at all: Dance music rose one percent, while pop actually dipped a bit, down two percent. The only other genres to outpace the overall growth in streams were country, jazz, and musicals.

From Regional to International

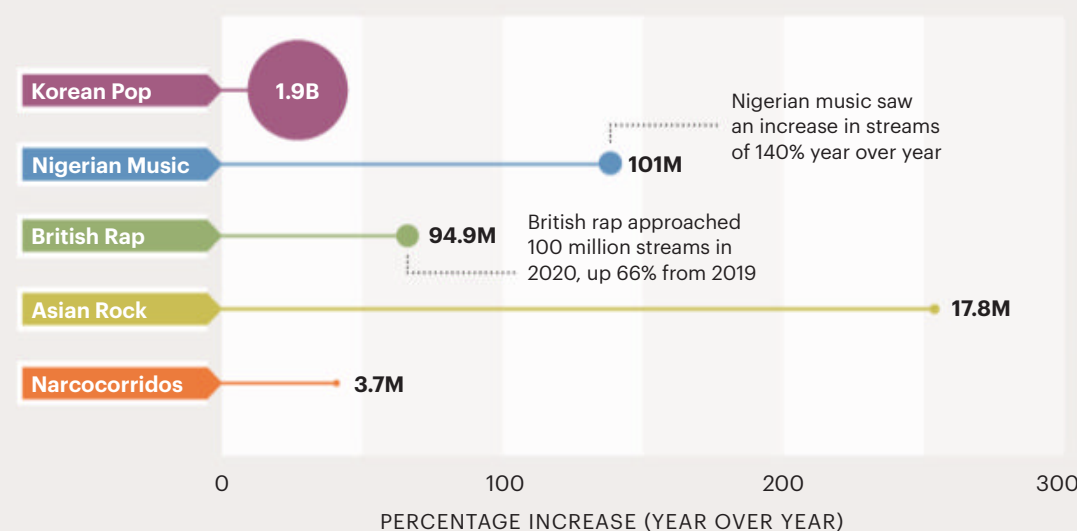
Within Latin music, the subgenres that experienced the biggest leaps weren't reggaeton or Latin pop – two crossover sounds that have historically appealed to large U.S. audiences – but regional genres steeped in traditions from throughout Latin America.

Regional Mexican music, in particular, rose in on-demand audio streams.



Global Subgenres Gain in Popularity

These sounds soared in 2020. Circle size represents total streams



Ranchera climbed by 54 percent, while narcocorridos (or drug ballads) saw a 41 percent increase compared with 2019. Regional Mexican artists reached the upper ranks of the charts more than ever, and some became crossover stars: Eslabon Armado, a trio who formed in California but play traditional Mexican sierrita music, reached Number 24 on the Rolling Stone 200 chart with their album *Vibras de Noche*, the highest ranking for a regional Mexican group. And Natanael Cano, a leader in corridos tumbados – a hip-hop take on corridos – increased his streams fivefold in 2020, reaching Number 70 on the Artists 500 chart.

Other increases included a 37 percent rise for merengue, a sound that began in the Dominican Republic, and a 27 percent lift for cumbia, whose roots are in Colombia.

Afrobeats Heats Up

America is a little late to Afrobeats, but over the past few years, U.S. listeners have been playing catch-up – especially, it seems, in 2020. Streams for Afrobeats and Nigerian music more than doubled in the U.S. compared with 2019, according to Alpha Data. Year over year, streams for Afrobeats rose 129 percent.

This meant that more Nigerian artists reached the U.S. charts than ever before. All told, five African artists hit the Breakthrough 25 chart in 2020; Burna Boy and Davido, who were already established stars in Nigeria, both launched albums onto the RS 200 and reached Number 128 and 263, respectively, on the Artists 500.

K-pop Keeps Up the Pace

K-pop's streams have been growing steadily and quickly in the U.S. over the past few years, and in 2020, the genre kept that momentum going, with streams rising 31 percent year over year. And it wasn't just BTS, though the group did top the RS 200 for the first time, making them the second K-pop act to do so. The girl group Blackpink reached Number Two on the RS 200 with their debut, *The Album*, and also had a collaboration with Selena Gomez, "Ice Cream," that hit the Top 10 on the RS 100.

FROM TOP: STILLZ; UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP; MICAIAH CARTER; JIMMY FONTAINE; KENNETH CAPPELLO; BETH GARRABRANT; ATLANTIC RECORDS; REPUBLIC RECORDS; GRIFFIN LOTZ; DUNCAN LOUDON; JACKIE DIMAILIG; EPIC RECORDS; DANNY CLINCH; STILLZ; TYLER BENZ; IAN WITLEN; DAVE MEYERS; ZACH MASSEY; ATLANTIC RECORDS; EPIC RECORDS; JACK MCKAIN



HIGHLIGHT

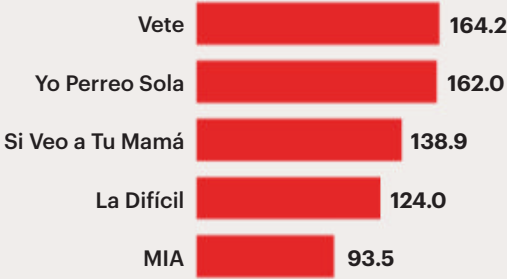
BAD BUNNY'S TRIUMPHANT YEAR

WHEN BAD BUNNY released his second solo album, *YHLQMDLG*, toward the beginning of 2020, he shed many of the crossover pop sounds of his star-making 2018 debut. Where *X 100pre* had featured the likes of Drake and Diplo, his follow-up was closer to the underground reggaeton of Puerto Rico in the Nineties. As Suzy Exposito wrote in her four-and-a-half-star *ROLLING STONE* review, this time the Puerto Rican star — born Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio — was “asking the world to cross over to him.”

Which is to say, 2020's Latin-music charts takeover looks a lot different from that of 2017, when “Despacito” sent the U.S. into a frenzy. Speaking to RS of the “wholesome reggaetoncito” that took hold in the U.S. circa “Despacito,” Bad Bunny noted: “That’s fine, I am not criticizing that style of song. But street reggaeton, O.G. reggaeton, perreo... it deserves a space in the pop world.”

YHLQMDLG pulled in 1.5 billion streams in 2020 and took third place on *ROLLING STONE*’s list of the Best Albums of 2020. In November, his alt-rock-tinged LP, *El Último Tour Del Mundo*, became the first all-Spanish-language album to hit Number One on the RS 200, and finally took him to Number One on the Artists 500. Now, Bad Bunny finishes 2020 at Number 13 on our year-end Artists 500 chart. From January 3rd through December 31st, 2020, he pulled in close to 3 billion on-demand audio streams in the U.S., outpacing his 2019 sum by more than a billion. As Ricky Martin told RS, “Benito has reconfirmed the fact that music has no barriers.” **E.B.**

Biggest Tracks (Streams in Millions)



Top Artists of 2020

Drake ruled supreme in the year's streaming totals

			STREAMS
1		Drake	5.86B
2		Juice WRLD	5.49B
3		YoungBoy Never Broke Again	4.73B
4		Lil Baby	4.18B
5		Taylor Swift	4.12B
6		Lil Uzi Vert	4.12B
7		Post Malone	3.94B
8		Pop Smoke	3.74B
9		The Weeknd	3.55B
10		DaBaby	3.55B
11		Future	3.16B
12		Eminem	3.05B
13		Bad Bunny	2.96B
14		Rod Wave	2.79B
15		Billie Eilish	2.76B
16		Ariana Grande	2.73B
17		Luke Combs	2.72B
18		Roddy Ricch	2.69B
19		Travis Scott	2.57B
20		XXXTentacion	2.35B

The Year-End Artists 500 chart ranks artists by on-demand audio streams in the U.S. from January 3rd, 2020, through December 31st, 2020.

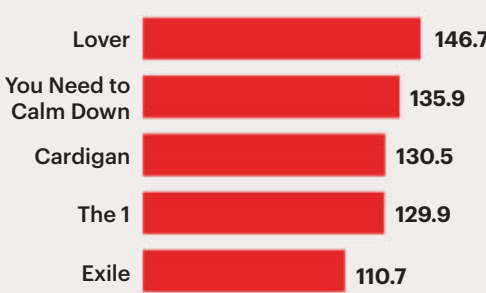
Drake Takes Back the Throne

After a brief cosmic rupture in which the universe pondered a parallel reality ruled by Post Malone, things have settled back to normal: Drake is Number One. He's been the most-streamed artist of the year every year since 2015 — apart from 2019, when Posty beat him by 50 million streams. This year, with the help of his compilation mixtape *Dark Lane Demo Tapes*, Drake pulled in more than 5.8 billion on-demand audio streams.

Taylor Swift Picks Up the Pace

Taylor Swift had a busy 2020. As the world shut down, she went to work in the studio and came out with not one but two albums, *Folklore* and *Evermore*. While this is a common pace for many rappers, it's pretty speedy for a pop artist. Perhaps as a result, Swift saw streaming numbers that only rappers tend to reach, with more than 4.1 billion on-demand audio streams in 2020, greater than any other pop artist.

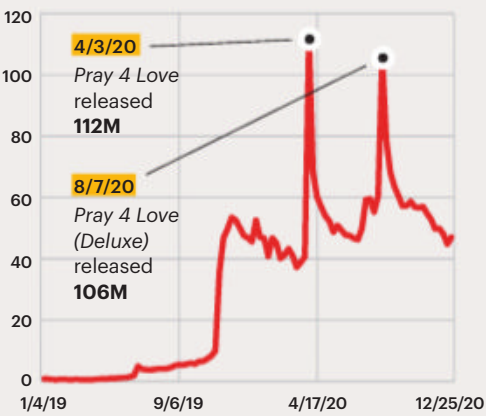
Biggest Tracks (Streams in Millions)



Rod Wave Crashes In

Just a year ago, Rod Wave was at Number 179 on the year-end Artists 500 list. But in 2020, the Florida-born rapper from St. Petersburg increased his streams by almost 400 percent. He followed his November 2019 debut, *Ghetto Gospel*, with *Pray 4 Love*, which debuted at Number Two on the RS 200. The album has seen more than 1.1 billion on-demand audio streams to date.

Rod Wave (Streams in Millions)



Luke Combs Plays the Game

Rappers have been using deluxe albums to squeeze more streams out of their releases for a few years. But country artists, who tend not to do as well with streaming, hadn't used that tactic quite the same way until Luke Combs dropped *What You See Ain't Always What You Get*, helping him become the first country act to sweep the RS albums, songs, and Artists 500 charts in one week.

MOVIES

Chloé Zhao's Long Road to Hollywood

With her lyrical film 'Nomadland' and Marvel's upcoming 'The Eternals,' the director has arrived

By MARIA FONTOURA

GROWING UP in Beijing, Chloé Zhao was, in her own words, “a trouble-maker.” In school, she would rip the covers off her textbooks and place them over her manga. At home, she gorged on Western culture – movies like *Terminator* and *Sister Act*, and hours upon hours of MTV. She fantasized endlessly about other worlds and faraway places.

“I wanted to leave home and go explore,” Zhao says. And, at the ripe old age of 14, she got her wish. Indulging her restlessness, her parents sent her to boarding school in London. Three years later, just shy of graduating, she pushed for one more move: “I want to go where the Hollywood sign is,” she told them. She transferred to L.A. High.

Today – after college in Massachusetts, a stint bartending in Manhattan, film school at NYU, and a few years making movies in the Badlands of South Dakota – Zhao, 38, is back in Hollywood, on very different terms than when she first arrived. This year will see her join the ranks of a very short list of A-list directors, thanks to the release of her third independent feature, *Nomadland* (due out February 19th), and, in the fall, Marvel's *The Eternals*. *Nomadland* channels Zhao's humanistic eye and ear to tell the story of an American underclass of older, itinerant workers who live out of vans and chase seasonal jobs to survive. With its breathtaking views of the American West and nuanced de-

pictions of men and women left behind by the global economy – all played by real-life nomads, except for Frances McDormand and David Strathairn – the film is a major Oscar contender. And if that intimate style of storytelling doesn't seem like a fit for the superheroes of the MCU, well, think again.

“Not only does Chloé make remarkable, small, personal movies in a remarkable, small, personal way, but she thinks in grand, cosmic, gigantic terms, which fit perfectly with what we wanted to do,” says Marvel Studios head Kevin Feige.

Just as Zhao was hired for *The Eternals* in the fall of 2018, she went into secret, guerrilla-style production on *Nomadland*. Over the four-month shoot, she and McDormand traveled in their own vans through five states, including South Dakota, Arizona, and Nevada. Zhao cast and scripted



on the fly, pulling in details from the lives of the people they met. McDormand worked alongside her nomadic counterparts, packing boxes for Amazon, harvesting beets, cleaning toilets at a campground. There is no pity or manipulation in their portrayal. As McDormand puts it, Zhao “draws a razor-sharp line between sentiment and sentimentality.”

“We all go through our own personal apocalypse at some point,” Zhao says of the film's



subjects. “We're forced to fight and to redefine ourselves, because everything that defined who we are is gone. . . . The ability for perseverance, to find a new life and sense of self – that, to me, is the human spirit.”

Living in cars and campgrounds was not new for Zhao, nor was using nonprofessional actors. She made her first two films in much the same way, out of financial necessity. After film school, she packed up and headed to South Dakota's Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, where she embedded herself in the community. She would chat up locals at bars or even the gas station, looking for stories she could shape into a movie – and for people willing to play a version of themselves onscreen. Her debut, 2015's *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*, is a tender snapshot of teen-

age siblings facing the hardships of life on the reservation.

Her follow-up, *The Rider*, centers on a rising rodeo champ, Brady Jandreau – in the film, Brady Blackburn – who suffers a catastrophic fall. The story traces his adjustment to a new reality where his injuries prevent him from ever working with horses again. That film's rapturous reception brought Zhao full circle, putting her at the helm of the kind of blockbusters that awed her as a girl.

Zhao claims she's ready to slow down after *The Eternals* is completed. But don't be so sure. “Now, I just want to stay still for a long time,” she says with a rueful chuckle. “But the idea of constantly moving, finding out what's beyond the horizon . . . it's ancestral. It's in our blood to want to explore.”

ON THE MOVE


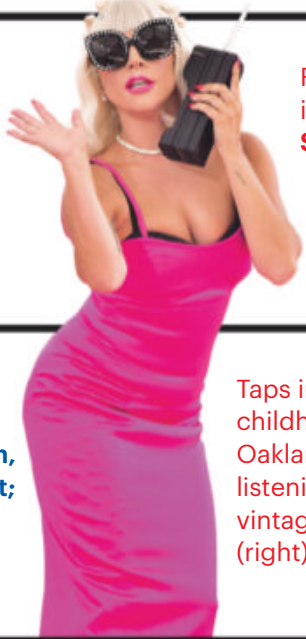

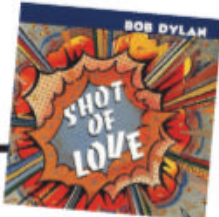





Above: Zhao with McDormand on the set of *Nomadland*. Top: In Ojai, California, in November.

SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES (“NOMADLAND”)



D.C. ROCK CITY

DONALD TRUMP may have welcomed Kanye West and Kid Rock into the White House, but Trump himself never seemed like pop’s biggest advocate; he even incurred the wrath of classic rockers like Neil Young, the Stones, and John Fogerty by using their songs at rallies without their go-aheads. Will the Biden administration be more inclined to rock the house? A guide to the musical predisposition of its key players, rated on a scale of one to four guitars. **DAVID BROWNE**

	JOE BIDEN PRESIDENT	KAMALA HARRIS VICE PRESIDENT	JOHN KERRY CLIMATE CZAR	ANTONY BLINKEN SECRETARY OF STATE
TASTE	Appropriately centrist: crooner pop (Sinatra , Frankie Valli), boomer rock (Beatles’ “Come Together,” Springsteen’s “We Take Care of Our Own”), dollops of modern pop (Lady Gaga’s “Til It Happens to You,” Sam Smith’s “Stay With Me”)	Heavy on upbeat empowerment anthems from Aretha (“ Young, Gifted and Black ”) and Funkadelic (“ One Nation Under a Groove ”), and recent R&B hits like Ella Mai’s “Boo’d Up ” and Khalid’s “Talk”	Proudly classic rock — favorite album is Abbey Road , and U2’s “Beautiful Day” and Van Halen’s “Right Now” often rocked his 2004 presidential-campaign rallies	Indie-alt guitar rock reflecting his late-period-boomer birthday (1962) 
TRIVIA	Called his dad “a pretty fair clarinet and saxophone player” 	Favorite song to crank loud is Bob Marley’s “Sun Is Shining” 	During prep school days, played bass in an early-Sixties rock band called the Electras. Repertoire included surf-style songs and a version of “Summertime Blues”	While in college in the Eighties, wrote reviews for the <i>Harvard Crimson</i> of Bob Dylan’s Shot of Love (“valuable, if somewhat uneven”) and Lou Reed’s The Blue Mask (“melodic, lush guitar textures”) 
BONA FIDES	Endorsed during campaign by Lady Gaga (right), Common , and Rufus Wainwright ; in 2019, tweeted a happy birthday to Springsteen	Taps into her childhood in Oakland by listening to vintage Too Short (right) tracks	During a 2004 campaign rally in Cleveland, got a guitar pick from Springsteen that he’d just used onstage; had his photo taken with John Lennon during an anti-Vietnam War rally in the Seventies	As singer-guitarist Ablinken, has released the ballad “Patience”; white-guy funk “Lip Service”; and Pink Floyd -style “Without Ya,” whose lyrics — “Praying for a change of heart/Can we make a brand-new start?” — hint at diplomacy
OFF-KEY MOMENT	In an interview with Cardi B (left) last year, noted that because his daughter had nicknamed him Joey B., “We may be related!” 	Potentially infuriated Taylor Swift loyalists after receiving an endorsement from record executive and Swift nemesis Scooter Braun	On the campaign trail in 2004, encouraged a teenager who wrote hip-hop rhymes about him with, “I’d like to hear you rap that”	In “ Lip Service ,” sings cringe-worthy lyrics: “You said you like me fine, but not in that way/Oh, was it such a crime to want you to stay?/ And then I came onto you/But you said let’s just be friends, yeah”
OVERALL CRED				





A SERIES IN WHICH
ARTISTS SHARE THEIR
NONMUSICAL PASSIONS

Joan Baez's Portraits of Peace

IN THE YEARS leading up to her 2019 farewell trek, Joan Baez would often sit on her tour bus and paint before shows. “I wasn’t paying any attention to the concerts, really,” the folk icon, 80, says over Zoom from her home near Palo Alto, California. “I would paint up until the last second, and then I’d walk out and I’d sing.”

Baez turned her preshow focus back to music as her final concerts approached, but since saying goodbye to the road, she’s gotten more serious about her lifelong love of sketching and painting, spending three to four hours each day working with acrylic paint and wood panels in a small studio at her house. “I just get in front of the canvas and start hurling things and seeing what comes out of the mess,” she says. Her specialty is impressionistic portraits of real people — some she’s known well, others she’s admired from afar — using a self-taught method accented with tips from visual-artist friends. “A guy showed me how to paint [eye]glasses, [and] it took years off of what I would have to do experimenting on my own,” she says. “Aside from that, there’s not been formal training. It’s the same as the music.”

Many of her subjects, who include Bob Dylan, Colin Kaepernick, Kamala Harris, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Greta Thunberg, and Dr. Anthony Fauci, connect to her passion for justice. “It turned out that everyone I was painting had to do with nonviolent change and social change,” she says. “My painting is the best I can do at the moment to try and encourage people towards a possibly better world. I’m just really lucky to be able to do that.”

Baez’s portraits are a hit on Instagram, where she paired them with captions that encouraged voting in the fall’s election, and her latest solo exhibition, “Mischief Makers 2,” is showing at the Seager Gray Gallery in Marin County, California, through February 14th. “I don’t have regrets,” she says of her decision to trade a guitar for a paintbrush. “It allows me to say that I retired from touring, but obviously not from life.” **ANGIE MARTOCCIO**

Baez in her home studio with portraits of Dylan and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, October 2020 ▶





TRIBUTE

The Ballad of Justin Townes Earle

He was a brilliant songwriter who built his own legend, but couldn't outrun the darkness that came with it

By JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

ONE DAY in the spring of 2018, Jenn Marie Earle was washing dishes in her Portland, Oregon, home, when her husband, Justin Townes Earle, walked into the kitchen with his guitar to play her a song he'd just written.

As Justin started singing, Jenn Marie began to cry. On its surface, "Ahi Esta Mi Nina" was the tale of a Puerto Rican father attempting to reconnect with his estranged daughter after a long prison stint. But Jenn Marie realized that the song was ultimately about her husband's pain. His career had leveled off in recent years, and a sense of isolation had set in as he became increasingly worried about being able to provide for his wife and baby daughter. Justin was locking himself inside a dark room off the basement for hours to write, communicating with Jenn Marie through a grate connected to the kitchen upstairs. "If you need me," Justin would shout, "just stomp your hoof, my little dear."

"I'd seen him starting to become more distant, in many ways," Jenn Marie says. "That song, to me, was an admittance, of choosing the fate of being locked away from what means the most to you." The album Justin was writing in that unlit basement study, the last album released while he was alive, would be called *The Saint of Lost Causes*. "I think he was admitting

that he was defeated, in a lot of ways," Jenn Marie says.

It had been less than a decade since Earle released his breakthrough, 2010's *Harlem River Blues*, which set songs about subway conductors, addiction, and cramped Brooklyn apartments to old-time gospel, folk, and country-blues styles. By that point, he was transcending omnipresent comparisons to his father, country hit-maker turned folkie Steve Earle, and was poised to become the first new solo superstar in the genre of commercial roots music that had come to be known as Americana.

Onstage, Earle was an electrifying presence: six-foot-four, dressed in vintage suits, playing in a fiery style of fingerpicking he'd picked up listening to the bluesman Mance Lipscomb. He assumed the public persona of a world-weary troubadour, one worthy of his cursed namesake, the self-destructive country-folk genius Townes Van Zandt, a friend of his father. He could be Old Testament-intense one moment, sardonically witty the next, bantering with hecklers and tossing off one-liners like, "I haven't swayed from Bruce Springsteen's formula of girls, cars, and sex," before adding, "Oh, and Mama."

Earle was funny, caring, and obsessed with esoterica involving antique Rolexes and baseball history. His

magnetic persona left a permanent impression on those who knew him. "He lived the life that you would read about some other country legend living," says early tourmate James Felice of the Felice Brothers. The son of an entertainer who understood showbiz better than most, Earle embraced and solidified his own legend on and off the stage, sharing tragicomic stories about his adolescent heroin overdoses and bar fights that cost him teeth.

But that persona also masked problems that only worsened as Earle's career plateaued. He wrestled with mental-health struggles and self-doubt, and like his father, he struggled with addiction. "The fact that I survived my twenties is a miracle," he once said, "and I believe that wholeheartedly."

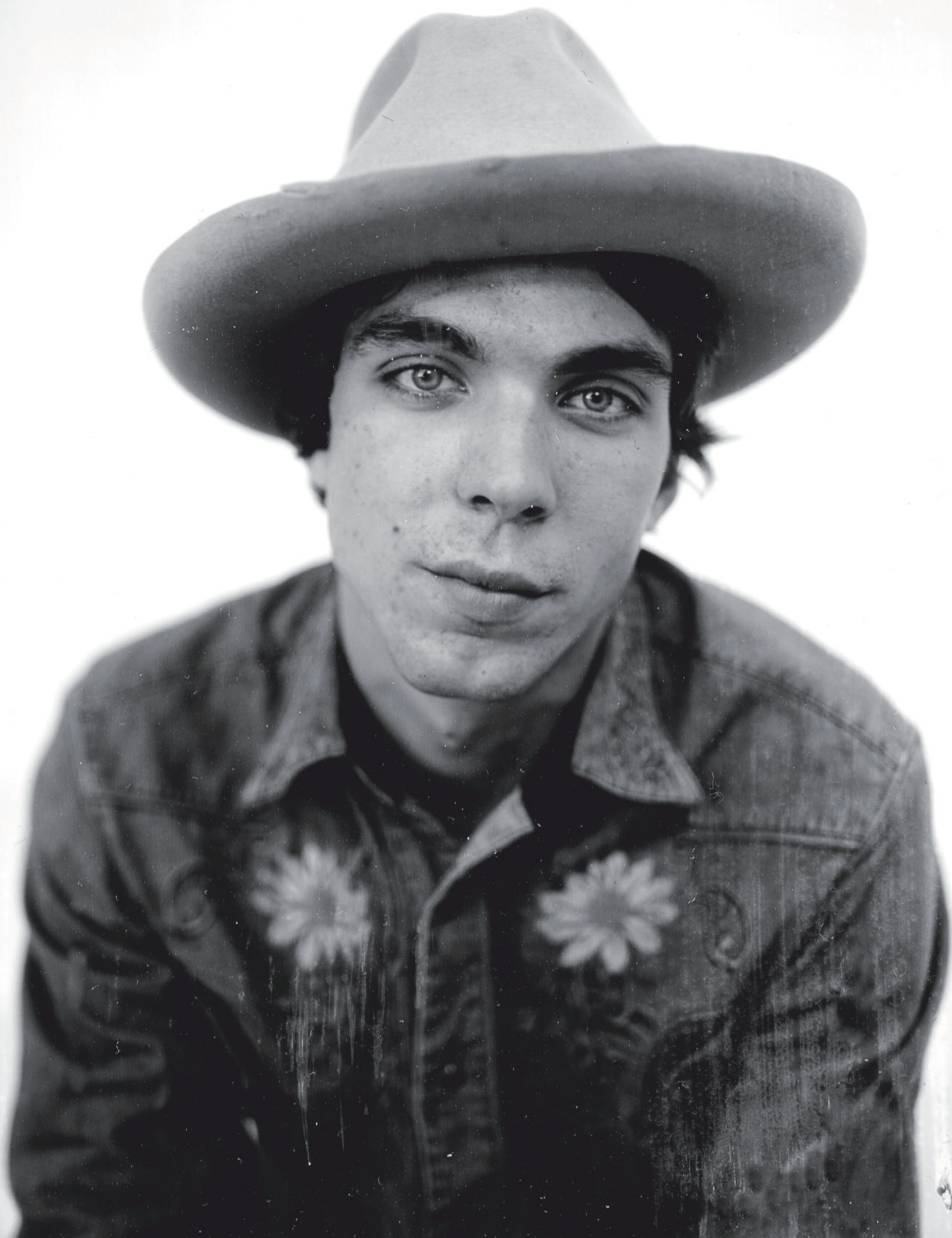
As the years passed, Earle's insecurities grew. "There was a huge part of

Justin that didn't believe in himself," says Jenn Marie. "He saw the music business changing... When his [2014 and 2015 albums, *Single Mothers* and *Absent Fathers*] came out, he was disappointed they didn't do so well. I think that's where a lot of his darkness, his struggles with substance abuse and addiction, started to come to the surface in the last few years: him feeling like he wasn't good enough."

After writing *The Saint of Lost Causes* in 2018, Earle entered rehab, a process he'd been through more than a dozen times, then headed directly for the studio. The unusually vulnerable album seemed like an occasion for a career turnaround, and executives at his label, New West Records, were thrilled. But by the time Earle hit the road in the fall of 2019, he was drinking again, so much that bandmates wondered if they'd be able to finish the tour.

In January 2020, Jenn Marie helped Earle rent an apartment in Nashville, where he could temporarily live alone and focus on a flurry of musical projects. He embarked on a solo tour in March, only to shut it after one show, as the pandemic halted concerts nationwide. Forced to quarantine in Nashville, Earle floundered. "He needed an audience," says friend and producer Steve Poulton. "He was used to having one: putting that energy out, and getting it back."

"I can't blame him all that much," Justin once said of his father, Steve Earle. "I'm turning out to be more like him than I thought."



Earle considered producing a Nashville hip-hop act and contemplated several future albums, including a Billie Holiday tribute with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band and a record of duets with artists like Yasiin Bey (the rapper formerly known as Mos Def) and Brian Fallon of Gaslight Anthem. Earle, with his manager and close confidant, Larry Kusters, began planning a livestream series in which he would perform with guests and expound on his favorite topics – baseball, the Delta blues, Civil War battles. The working title for the show was *Justin Townes Earle: Misbehaving*.

But according to friends and family, Earle continued to struggle with addiction. Though he was only 38, two decades of chemical dependency had taken a toll on his body. On July 21st, he was admitted to a Nashville hospital for pneumonia and underwent a serious lung surgery that, according to Jenn Marie, was a result of the long-term effects of his drug and alcohol use. By the time he left the hospital on August 2nd, his doctor warned him that his body would not be able to keep up if he kept drinking. “We thought that would be a wake-up call,” says Jenn Marie.

Justin felt otherwise. “He always used to say to me, ‘The Earles don’t die, we’re invincible,’” says Kusters, who visited Earle after he left the hospital. A few weeks later, on Thursday, August 20th, Kusters spoke with an upbeat, if restless, Earle over the phone. “He was getting a little bit antsy: ‘When can we go out on the road?’” says Kusters. Per *The New York Times*, that same day Justin called his father, who told his son, “Do not make me bury you.”

“I won’t,” Justin replied.

Then, no one heard from him. When the Nashville Police Department performed a welfare check Sunday evening, they found Earle dead in his apartment. A toxicology report determined he died of an accidental overdose due to a combination of alcohol and cocaine that was laced with fentanyl, the deadly opiate responsible for the deaths of Prince and Tom Petty, among many others.

Earle’s death caused an outpouring among fans like Stephen King and Billy Bragg. Steve Earle paid tribute with *J.T.*, an album of his son’s songs. “The record is called *J.T.* because Justin was never called anything else until he was nearly grown.” Earle, who declined to speak for this article, said in a statement, “For better or worse, right or wrong, I loved Justin Townes Earle more than anything else on this Earth.”

“Justin shaped so much of the broader, younger perspective of what Americana music was,” says Earle’s

former manager Nick Bobetsky. As Earle’s primary musical partner, Adam Bednarik, says, “He changed the lives of a lot of other people around him for the better.”

Fellow singer-songwriter Jessica Lea Mayfield, who frequently toured with Earle, described his gift more simply: “He was able to explain trouble better than most.”

IN THE late Seventies, Steve Earle met Carol Ann Hunter at a Nashville bar where she worked. They married in 1981, and Hunter gave birth to Justin a year later. By the time Justin was four, in 1986, his parents had separated; that year, Steve Earle became an unlikely country star with his debut, *Guitar Town*. One song, “Little Rock ‘n’ Roller,” was a touring musician’s promise to his son: “One of these days when you’re a little older,” Steve sang, “you can ride the big bus and everything will be alright.”

Justin spent his early childhood with his mother in a then-rough neighborhood in South Nashville, where he was exposed to drugs and dropped out of school in eighth grade. “I had the shaved head and the rat tail and wore the Jams and Air Jordans,” Justin said in 2009.

When Justin dropped out of school, he began to see more of his father,

touring with him as a guitar tech and later doing odd jobs for his dad’s label. By the mid-Nineties, Steve was sober after being forced to kick a heroin addiction while briefly serving time in prison on drug charges in 1994.

In the late Nineties, Justin joined his first real band, the Swindlers, a collection of kids whose fathers were successful Nashville songwriters and musicians – “Music Row brats,” as one of them, Dustin Welch, puts it. The Swindlers’ headquarters was a backyard studio on Welch’s family property known as the Chicken Shack, a dusty shed full of recording gear, where Earle and Welch lived on and off as teenagers. The boys spent their nights partying and obsessing over their fathers’ blues records, putting their fingers on the spinning vinyl to slow them down and study the instrumental parts.

By the time he was a teenager, Justin was writing profoundly adult meditations on loneliness and despair like “Rogers Park.” It soon became clear the Swindlers would serve as a vessel for his blossoming songwriting. “He was this force of nature,” says another Swindler, Skylar Wilson, who produced several of Earle’s early records. “Everybody was trying to keep up.”

Even when the band members worked to break free of their fathers’ influence, it loomed over them. On

the Swindlers’ first tour, in Oklahoma City, they panicked when they realized it was Father’s Day. Each bandmate began frantically calling his dad. “Dumbass,” Welch remembers Steve Earle telling Justin, “that’s next month.”

As a budding songwriter, Justin was eager for his father’s approval, which didn’t come easily early in Justin’s career. “Steve knew how incredible of a writer [his son] was – he let me know that – but he couldn’t always let Justin know that,” says Welch. Once, after the Swindlers ended a show with a newly written original named “Maria,” Steve asked Justin about the Elvis Costello song he had closed with. More than a decade later, Justin was still proud of the unintentional compliment.

Steve increasingly became one of his son’s biggest public cheerleaders as Justin grew into his own as an artist, but privately Justin still hungered for his father’s approval. “I don’t know if he ever listened to *Harlem River Blues*,” Justin told a journalist in 2012. “I’ve gone over [to Steve’s house] a few times and still found the same, wrapped copy of it sitting on the countertop. My dad means well, but he gets all over the place sometimes. He’s just like me, scattered as shit.”

One of the first of many times Justin would mythologize his complicated relationship with his father in song was on “Decimation of a Southern Gentleman,” a frighteningly personal unreleased Swindlers-era tune that Earle soon abandoned: “You ever get the feeling you were gonna die in the streets that you were raised in? Doing the same things your daddy done?”

Eventually, the Swindlers grew apart, and Justin began focusing on his own music. In 2006, Earle and a friend, the singer-songwriter and photographer Joshua Black Wilkins, decided to embark on a joint solo tour. Wilkins suggested that Earle use his middle name, Townes, on the road. Earle agreed, and took the idea a step further, getting “Townes” tattooed below his throat.

For all his prodigious gifts, Justin was never free of the shadow of his father. Their complicated relationship ended up becoming one of his most enduring themes as a songwriter, from 2009’s “Mama’s Eyes” (“I am my father’s son”) to 2012’s “Am I That Lonely Tonight?” (“Hear my father on the radio”) to his 2015 album, *Absent Fathers*. Justin wasn’t concerned with his parents hearing his songs that addressed them bluntly: “I always had to deal with it in a public format,” he said. “Why shouldn’t they?”

In the early days of Justin’s career, father and son enjoyed exchanging playful jabs in public. [Cont. on 78]



THE FAMILY EARLE

Steve and Justin at Coney Island in 2011. “Everything Justin ever learned, he learned from his dad,” says friend and photographer Joshua Black Wilkins.

NO ARTIST had a bigger year in 2020 than Bad Bunny. The world shuttered shortly after the release of the Puerto Rican superstar's acclaimed second album, *YHLQMDLG*, last February, but he still found a way to keep his career – and his fans – moving. In May, he dropped an LP of outtakes, and in September, he came to New York for a spectacular, Covid-appropriate mobile concert, where he rode through the Bronx, Washington Heights, and Harlem on the flatbed of a truck and got a hero's welcome. The grand finale came in November, when he shared *El Último Tour del Mundo*, which made history as the first all-Spanish-language LP to top charts such as ROLLING STONE's Top 200 Albums. "The truth is, I enjoy [making music]; it's what I like most," he says in Spanish. "If there's recognition that comes with that, it's extra. But obviously, it feels great and makes me proud."

Your new album imagines the last tour on Earth.

When the world opens up again, what are your shows going to be like?

The best in history – I swear that's how I feel and what I want. Just before the pandemic and lockdown, we were getting all the details and experiences down for the next tour, and it had been incredible to see everything coming together. Now, with all that's happened, the feeling is different. When we do finally get onstage, it's going to be a totally new energy.

If you actually had to plan your last show, what would it be like?

It would be in Puerto Rico. There's no other place on Earth. That's where the first one was – that's where the last one will be.

The album shows some alt-rock influences. What kinds of bands were you into as a kid?

Honestly, I have so many. Since I was a kid, I listened to so many styles of music. With my dad, I listened to one thing; with my mom, I listened to something else; with my grandparents, an-



Q&A

Bad Bunny

On his string of historic successes, fusing reggaeton with alt-rock, and why he's looking for a new hobby

By JULYSSA LOPEZ

other thing; with my cousins, another. And then as you get older, sometimes you want to try completely new genres. There are way too many artists, bands, groups that have inspired me. I actually came to this conclusion the other day: Even the artists whose names I can't remember, they're part of my influences.

Were you into other things associated with rock and punk growing up? The video for "Yo Visto Así," for example, features an

homage to skateboarding. Were you ever into that?

No, no, no. Zero kind of activities that require motor action whatsoever [laughs]. I can stand on a skateboard for about five seconds, and that's it. But the attitude and the energy, I've definitely always identified with that.

Does that mean you were more of a quiet, artistic kid, or a showman?

I feel like I've always been both. My mood is unpredictable in the morning, and then

at one in the afternoon, it's totally different. I've always been that way.

What has it meant to you to show how you can fuse reggaeton with all these other genres?

I try to do things organically. I just try to enjoy it. I grew up listening to everything, and I love music in general. Being Puerto Rican in the Nineties, reggaeton is the music that we mostly grew up on. But I can also make other rhythms, other fusions, and that's

part of what I'm passionate about – creating and having no limits. There are so many rhythms in the world, and there's so much to try still.

On the last song from YHLQMDLG, you said this new album would be your final one. Can you confirm once and for all — you're not retiring yet, right?

Confirmed! [Laughs.] There's still a lot to do, and you never know what's going to happen. One day you'll say something in an interview, and then a situation will come up where you'll go, "Well, no, I want to retire when I'm 35." Then when you're 35, maybe you'll still feel like doing a bunch of things. For now, I'm still here.

The final song on El Último Tour del Mundo is "Cantares de Navidad." How does that song relate to Puerto Rican holiday traditions for you?

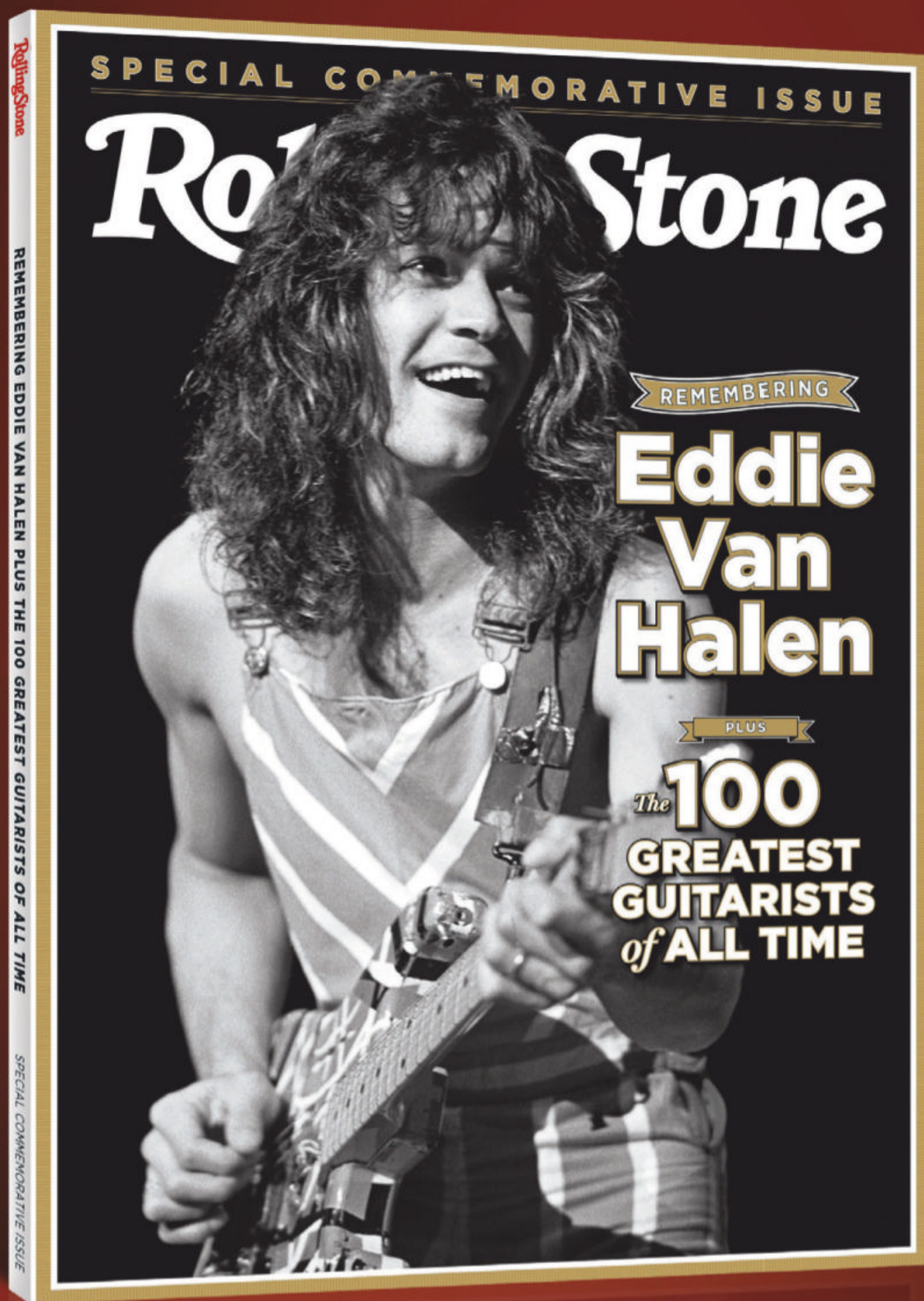
It's a song I like a lot personally – it brings up all of these beautiful memories from my childhood, of Christmas, of my family, of my grandparents, of my grandmother. We had planned from the beginning that the album would come out on Thanksgiving, and that's a really important time in Puerto Rico. I wanted to give people who listen to me and support me – especially people in Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans who are away from the island – a song that felt like a Christmas gift. It's the last song, and it puts people in a Christmas mood so they can keep celebrating.

Speaking of Christmas, what did you ask for this year?

Nothing! [Laughs.] I never ask for anything, I ask for peace and love and time to enjoy everything, for my family to be well, and for my own health so I can keep making music and reaching new goals.

What do you have your eye on doing in 2021?

I spend so much time creating, and I have more plans to keep working. Outside of music, I don't know. I need to come up with new hobbies. I don't have a hobby that isn't music – it's my work, my play, my way of relaxing. I need to sit down and find some other stuff to do [laughs]. ®



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How the Democrats Can Save Themselves

Despite big victories, there are signs of trouble for Team Blue. What is the party's best path forward?

By ANDY KROLL

THE FOLLOWING two statements stand in complete opposition to each other, and yet they are both true: The Democratic Party is dominant. The Democratic Party is screwed.

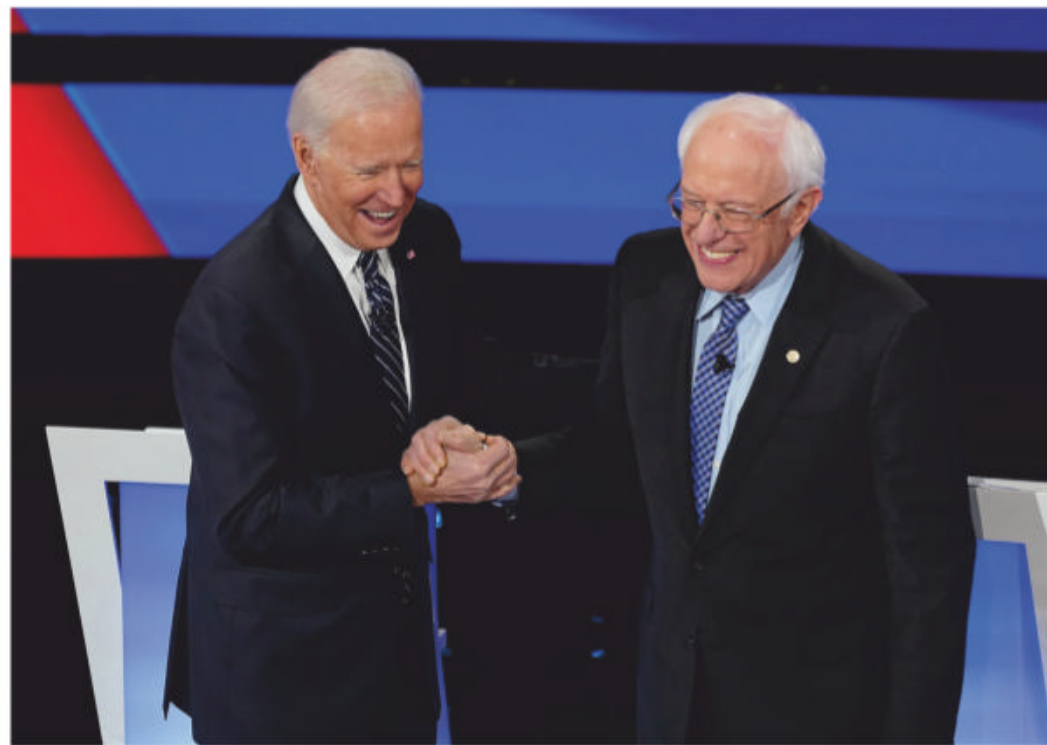
Consider these facts. In 2020, Joe Biden received more votes than any other presidential candidate in U.S. history. He rebuilt the “blue wall” of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin; turned Georgia blue for the first time since 1992; and clinched Arizona thanks to a commanding performance in the state’s most populous county, Maricopa, which no Democrat had carried since Harry Truman in 1948. It was a banner year for progressive policies, with red and blue states voting in November to approve a \$15 minimum wage, new taxes on the rich for education, and legal weed. And after two victories in the January Georgia runoff elections, Democrats regained control of the U.S. Senate for the first time since 2015.

Yet for all of these promising signs, the 2020 election brought plenty of grim news for the Democrats. They lost 10 seats in the House in a year when they were projected to expand their majority. At the state level, Democrats failed to flip a single legislative chamber in this crucial last election before the 2021 round of redistricting. And after four years of autocratic creep and catastrophic incompetence, amid a pandemic he vowed was “going to disappear,” Donald Trump still won 74 million votes, 11 million more than he earned four years ago. Trump’s assault on democracy and reality reached its apotheosis with the occupation and ransacking of the United States Capitol on January 6th – an act of sedition that somehow had the support of 45 percent of Republicans in one recent poll. Biden won the Electoral College by a comfortable 74-vote margin, but had just 22,000 ballots gone the other way in Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin, Biden would have lost. “It was a near-death experience,” Ben Wikler, chairman of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin, told me in December. “A few voters in the wrong places and Trump would be planning his second inaugural right now.”

A close brush with death typically prompts a re-evaluation of one’s actions and some form of course correction. Yet in the wake of the 2020 election, the debate inside the Democratic Party has reverted back to the blame game between the moderate wing and the insurgent left. Two days after the election, Rep. Abigail Spanberger (D-Va.) told fellow House Democrats on a private debrief call that “we will get fucking torn apart in 2022” if they repeat their strategy from this year, urging her colleagues to “not ever use the word ‘socialist’ or ‘socialism’ ever again... We lost good members because of that.” On Twitter, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) blamed poor strategic decisions such as the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee’s refusal to work with consultants aligned with the progressive left and a lackluster use of digital-media tools like Facebook during a pandemic election year. Aggressive policy positions weren’t the real issue, she

added: Most candidates who ran on Medicare for All and the Green New Deal won their races. “So the whole ‘progressivism is bad’ argument just doesn’t have any compelling evidence that I’ve seen,” Ocasio-Cortez tweeted.

This intraparty squabbling obscures far more daunting problems that face the Democratic Party in the coming decade. Even as the party grows its ranks in Sun Belt metropolises like Atlanta and Houston, the geographic clustering of Democratic voters on the coasts and in the cities will make it ever more difficult for Democrats to gain a clear majority in the U.S. Senate, let alone a 60-vote supermajority. The Supreme Court is stacked with conservatives for decades to come. And thanks to gerrymandering, a conveyor belt of right-wing judicial



nominations, and bottomless dark money, Republicans have locked in minority rule for possibly a generation. Meanwhile, the Democratic brand is so weak that tens of millions of people voted for legal weed, new taxes, and higher wages, and then, on the same ballot, chose Republican candidates who opposed those very same policies. “Progressive policies are popular until Democrats start talking about them,” says Matt Hildreth, executive director of RuralOrganizing.org, a research and activism hub for progressives in rural America.

What is the future for the Democratic Party? What can it do to persuade voters that it is the party of big popular ideas that will improve people’s lives? How can it break the GOP’s increasingly desperate grip on power, as evidenced by the party’s willingness to shred democracy in order to preserve that power? And what can Biden do to hold on to his 2020 coalition, avoid an electoral wipeout in 2022, and tackle the many crises that face the country?

In the absence of any real postmortem by the Democratic Party, ROLLING STONE interviewed some two dozen people – elected officials, pollsters, historians, consultants, grassroots organizers – and asked what Democrats can do to regain their standing and break GOP minority rule. They offered different and sometimes competing theories about how the Democrats lost touch with their populist roots, the

disconnect between Democrats and progressive policies, and what Democrats can do to regain their identity as the party of the people. But they all agreed that the results of 2020 require some soul-searching about what comes next.

Justice Must Be Done

LESS THAN 24 HOURS after a violent mob stormed and occupied the U.S. Capitol, Congressman Jason Crow (D-Colo.) was already thinking about how to repair the damage done. The short-term solutions were apparent. Law-enforcement authorities at all levels of government needed to arrest anyone who participated in the pro-Trump, QAnon-inspired insurrection, no matter how long it took. “America

needs to see that – the world needs to see that,” Crow says. “These people need to be walked away in handcuffs and put in jail.”

But the more difficult question is this: What do we, as a country, do to ensure the events of January 6th, 2021, never happen again? And to broaden the scope even more, what can we do to ensure another Trump never happens again? The first step, Democratic lawmakers and rule-of-law experts say, is a commitment from Biden that he will not turn a blind eye to the actions of his predecessor. More than a decade ago, Barack Obama’s administration

vowed to “look forward and not backwards,” ruling out any form of accountability for the Bush administration’s use of torture or for the lies and deceptions sold to the American people to justify the invasion of Iraq. As a presidential candidate, Biden tried to have it both ways, saying he would not interfere in the Justice Department’s decisions but insisting that any discussion of prosecuting Trump was “a very, very unusual thing and probably not very...good for democracy.”

But Trump and his allies’ desperate final acts in the period between the election and Biden’s inauguration – pardoning political loyalists, spreading dangerous lies about a “stolen” election, pressuring state-level officials to commit voter fraud, and inciting a mob of supporters to storm the U.S. Capitol – leave Biden and the Democrats no choice. “If we don’t engage in holding this president accountable for the crimes and the impeachable offenses he’s committed,” John Bonifaz, a constitutional-law expert and president of the liberal advocacy group Free Speech for People, told me last fall, “then we only feed the idea that the rule of law is being destroyed and therefore those who want to can follow in his footsteps and engage in unconstitutional or abusive behavior in violation of the law.” In other words, if there are no real consequences for anyone involved, what’s to stop it from happening again?

PARTY FACTIONS
Moderates can’t just define themselves by opposing progressive ideas or Donald Trump, they have to actually stand for something. “When Democrats do well, they do it by getting voters to unify around a set of programs and a rhetoric that put some muscle behind the boilerplate talk,” says a historian.

But impeaching or prosecuting Trump won't be enough; it won't prevent another Trump from rising to power. It won't address the underlying rot in our democracy. For that, we need to restore the people's trust in government. Government-reform experts say that with control of the House and a slim Democratic majority in the Senate, the Democratic leadership on Capitol Hill should vote on legislation like H.R. 1, the sweeping package of voting-rights protections, campaign-money transparency, and anti-corruption provisions that House Democrats approved in the last Congress. Norm Eisen, who served as Obama's White House ethics czar, says Biden should immediately sign an executive order that would drastically limit, if not ban, special-interest lobbyists from serving in the Biden administration.

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), a senior member of the judiciary committee, says he envisions a three-pronged strategy to repair the damage done by the Trump administration and restore faith and trust in government. The first step, he says, is re-establishing the independence of the Justice Department. Whitehouse suggests creating a special cleanup committee of DOJ veterans. Operating outside the day-to-day workings of the department, the committee would identify wrongdoing by the last administration and recommend reforms to better protect the DOJ from political interference. "If you aren't running an honest Department of Justice, it's hard for anything else in the government to be honest," Whitehouse says.

To root out possible Trump-era corruption in federal agencies like the EPA or the Commerce Department, Whitehouse says Congress should launch a special legislative committee that could function unrestrained by the typical committee jurisdiction lines. "There should be one-stop shopping for people who want to come out of the woodwork and say, 'Hey, here's a file that I kept or a story that you need to hear,'" he says. "We now have the chance for a bicameral committee, and I think there was enough corruption across enough agencies, very often with common threads, [that] it's more important to see it as a whole and deal with it as a whole."

And finally, Whitehouse says, President Biden should establish a commission made up of experts to investigate the fossil-fuel industry's decades-long campaign to undermine climate science and block ambitious action to fight climate change. "We've done a crap job as Democrats and as a Congress in taking a thorough look at this apparatus that is the beast that defeats us," he says. "Why would you not try to undermine and expose that beast, particularly if you want to do something serious about climate change? America needs to know this story."

Actually Stand for Something

FOR THE PAST four to six years, the central animating principle of the Democratic Party boiled down to this: Trump is a menace, and we're not him. Biden shaped his entire presidential run around a promise to "turn the page" on Trump

MINORITY RULE

Democrats have soul-searching to do, but they also have structural disadvantages. Our electoral system favors Republicans:

► GOP presidents have won the popular vote only once in the past 20 years, but held the presidency for 12 of those 20 years because of the Electoral College.

► Republicans also benefit from extreme gerrymandering. In the 2018 Wisconsin state Assembly, Democrats got 54 percent of the vote, but the GOP won 63 percent of the seats.

► In the U.S. Senate, Wyoming, the least populous state, has 68 times the voting power of the most populous, California.

and "restore the soul of America." In Biden's telling, Trump was a hideous aberration and Scranton Joe was the candidate who could bring about a return to calmer, more "normal" times, an elder statesman with the experience and connections to work across the aisle.

Put another way, the Democratic Party chose a strategy in 2020 that provided an off-ramp for independents and Republicans to abandon Trump and vote for Biden. It was a choice that maximized the chances Trump would lose but, as you might expect, offered little in the way of support for the rest of the Democratic ticket. And as a result, Democrats underperformed in key down-ballot races. "Joe Biden didn't have coattails," Sean McElwee, a progressive pollster who runs Data for Progress, tells ROLLING STONE. "He was wearing a crop top."

Now, Democrats won't have the big, bad orange man to kick around anymore (unless Trump runs again in 2024, in which case God help us). They will have to do more than insist to the American public that Trump must be stopped. They will have to come up with something more than feel-good, pollster-approved, focus-grouped slogans ("Stronger Together," "Build Back Better") and value-heavy paeans to equality and representation, a living wage and affordable health care, a clean environment, racial justice, and a good education – values that couldn't be more important but don't mean anything without policy to make them real. The Democrats need to *really* stand for something.

The party's progressive insurgency of Bernie Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez have put their weight behind Medicare for All, a \$15 minimum wage, and a Green New Deal, but other factions of the party tend to define themselves more in opposition to the left's ideas than by offering their own distinct vision. "There's so much of that in our party – defining yourself by what you're against, not what you're for," says Faiz Shakir, who ran Sanders' 2020 campaign and before that worked for Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid. "I understand moderates saying, 'I'm not for the progressive side of the ledger,' but it's awful to be defined by what you're not."

So what should Democrats stand for? Michael Kazin, a Georgetown professor who's writing a book about the history of the Democratic Party, says the party has been most successful when it embraces what he calls "moral capitalism" – a system that balances market forces that help people earn a living and build wealth, with strong regulations and oversight to rein in big corporations and ensure economic growth is spread widely across society. In practical terms, Kazin says, this might look like a combination of what Sanders, a Democratic Socialist, and Elizabeth Warren, a progressive capitalist, put forward during their ill-fated 2020 presidential campaigns: economic programs like free college, tougher laws against monopolies, a fair tax code, improved labor rights, and trade deals that benefit American workers.

"When Democrats do well, they do it by getting voters to unify around a set of programs and a rhetoric that put some muscle behind the boilerplate talk about having an economy

that works for everyone," Kazin says. "People like to get stuff from the government, and they like to feel the government is doing something for them."

The 2020 election showed there are issues with broad popular support that neither party has fully championed, issues that could reinvigorate the party under President Biden, such as legalizing marijuana. Public polls consistently show somewhere between 60 and 70 percent support for legal weed. In 2020, there were seven different ballot proposals involving legal weed, and all of them won, including in the ruby-red Republican states of South Dakota, Mississippi, and Montana.

One of the loudest voices in the Democratic Party saying that Democrats should own the issue is John Fetterman, the lieutenant governor of Pennsylvania and a possible U.S. Senate candidate in 2022. The way Fetterman sees it, legal weed is an economic issue (regulating and taxing it could provide much-needed revenue for states), a racial-justice issue (ending the failed War on Drugs and the discriminatory policies that imprisoned tens of thousands of black and brown people), and a veteran issue (marijuana is seen as a much safer option for vets with chronic pain and PTSD). "Prohibition is so much more work than just admitting you were wrong on legal weed," Fetterman says. "Let's just get it done."

Short of a 60-vote supermajority in the U.S. Senate, though, how ambitious can Biden really be in his first two years? There are some in the party, like Shakir, who argue Biden should go big – say, a bill raising the minimum wage to \$15 – barnstorm the country in support of it, and if Senate Republicans block it, tell every American he fought for higher wages while the Republicans stood in the way.

McElwee, the progressive pollster, takes a somewhat different view. While there are some policies Democrats can pass with 50 votes through a process called reconciliation (like a large clean-energy infrastructure package), the filibuster creates problems for other issues. McElwee suggests a focus on what he calls the "90 issues" – issues that have nearly unanimous support among the general public and the Democratic Party. These might not be the sexiest issues, but if passed into law, people will see immediate benefits. Examples McElwee offers include capping interest rates on payday loans (instead of blanket student-debt cancellation), Medicaid expansion (instead of Medicare for All), expanding the child tax credit (instead of universal child care), and free two-year public college (as opposed to free college, period).

"Often, we're talking about the things that will get the most media interest, and I think we need to, for the next two years, center on our most popular issues," McElwee says. "We need the stuff that is the 90-percent issue. That's true for the center of the party, and true for the left part of the party." And if Democrats leverage those gains into a filibuster-proof Senate majority in 2022, he adds, Biden and his allies can pursue their most ambitious policies. "Once we pass these reforms," McElwee says, "voters will

see the government creating positive change in their lives and support even broader expansion of government in their lives.”

Always Be Organizing

THE STORY OF HOW Obama and his top aides failed to sustain their history-making, grassroots-fueled 2008 campaign once he took office is one of the great cautionary tales of recent political history. Rather than find a way to channel the millions of field organizers, block captains, and fired-up volunteers into an organization that could shape and support Obama’s legislative agenda, the 2008 Obama machine was re-branded as Organizing for America and shoe-horned into the bureaucracy of the Democratic National Committee, where it was used to sell trinkets and drum up halfhearted phone-banking efforts. Meanwhile, the newly energized Republican Party used Obama’s policies to mobilize its own base, and in 2010, the GOP wiped out the Democrats, ending the Democratic supermajority in the Senate and winning back the House. At the state level, Republicans won nearly 700 seats in legislatures across the country, which gave them the ability to gerrymander the hell out of battleground states during the 2011 redistricting.

Everyone interviewed by ROLLING STONE agreed on this: The Democratic Party cannot repeat Obama’s mistake this time around. “We have to mobilize for midterms like the presidential race, and mobilize for the presidential like the apocalypse,” Wikler, the Wisconsin party chair, says.

Wikler understands this better than most. He spent a decade in the trenches of liberal grassroots activism, including a stint as the Washington director of MoveOn.org, watching his home state of Wisconsin, once a progressive beacon, become a Republican stronghold under the governorship of Scott Walker and GOP leaders like Reince Priebus and former Speaker Paul Ryan. So in 2019, Wikler launched a bid to be the next chairman of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin, pledging to supercharge organizing from the ground up.

He won the chairmanship and took over an organization faced with demographic trends that mirrored the national party’s. In the cities of Milwaukee and Madison, African American and white college-educated voters couldn’t wait to vote Trump out of office; in the once-reliably Republican suburbs outside Milwaukee, masses of disaffected voters were looking for an off-ramp to not vote for Trump; and across rural Wisconsin, small but significant numbers of Democrats lived in near-hiding among the white voters who identified so strongly with Trump that they would vote to give him not just a second term but a third and a fourth, if they could. “This is a diverse coalition,” Wikler says. “It’s diverse ideologically, racially, geographically, experientially, age-ly, educationally, and in every other dimension of identity.”

Trump had won Wisconsin by the slimmest of margins in 2016, and with more than a year to go until the 2020 election, Wikler recognized a

few things. One was that Trump’s performance against Hillary Clinton represented the floor, not the ceiling, of his possible support in Wisconsin. Another was that unless he and his team started ramping up their organizing and turnout machine for the general election right then, more than 12 months out, they would stand a real chance of losing to Trump yet again. “We built a plan intended to withstand a Category 5 hurricane, and we got one,” Wikler says.

But a question hangs over Biden’s victory: Are all the suburban voters and white college-educated voters who turned out for Biden now Democrats? Or did Democrats merely lease them for one election because of their revulsion to Trump? Cornell Belcher, a Democratic pollster who worked with Obama’s 2008 and 2012 campaigns, says he fears Democrats will



soon lose parts of Biden’s winning coalition if the party doesn’t continue to court those voters. In Belcher’s view, the best way to do that is by good old-fashioned party building – namely, diverting a chunk of those hundreds of millions of dollars normally reserved for Super PACs into the DNC itself and into state parties and grassroots groups in battleground states. Amanda Litman of Run for Something, which recruits and advises state and local candidates nationwide, says nothing less than a revival of the DNC’s 50-state strategy, made famous by Howard Dean in the mid-2000s, is needed. “If I was Joe Biden trying to find a DNC chair, I would find someone who would invest in that,” she says. Belcher suggests more targeted investment in Georgia, Arizona, Nevada, and other emerging battleground states. “I love Ohio, but it’s not the future,” Belcher says.

Organizers and political candidates say year-round organizing is the best shot for Democrats to win back swaths of rural America and not cede the middle of the country to the GOP. J.D. Scholten, a progressive populist who ran in 2018 and 2020 in Iowa’s Fourth Congressional District in the northwest part of the state, says Republicans have the built-in support of local chambers of commerce, farm bureaus, churches, and, of course, conservative TV and talk radio. “They all feed off of each

other, and Democrats have to compete against that,” Scholten says. Without that organizing, Democrats are defined as much by the right-wing echo chamber as they are by Democrats themselves. “Right now, in rural America, it’s not a debate between Democrats and Republicans,” says Matt Hildreth of RuralOrganizing.org. “It’s a debate between Republicans and the Fox News caricature of Democrats.”

But Fox News and the rest of that echo chamber do more than warp the public’s view of Democratic policies and politicians – they act as a 24/7 outrage machine aimed squarely at the Republican electorate. “It keeps Republican voters inflamed and ready to vote,” says Rachel Bitecofer, a political analyst and commentator. We saw it in 2009 and 2010, when Fox covered the tea party ad nauseum and whipped

up fears about Obama’s Affordable Care Act leading to “death panels.” If Democrats don’t keep their voters equally energized over the next two years, Bitecofer says, “they’re going to get hammered in the midterms.”

Take a Cue From Donald Trump

HE MAY HAVE BEEN the Democratic Party’s *bête noire* since he first emerged as the GOP’s birther-in-chief almost a decade ago, but if you talk to political operatives, especially those on the progressive left, you’ll find an almost begrudging respect for certain

elements of Trump’s pugilistic political style, as well as a belief that a Democratic Party led by a small group of AARP-card-carrying coastal elites could learn a thing or two from it.

Shakir, the Sanders adviser, says one hallmark of Trump’s presidency was his willingness to take the fight to his enemies, perceived and real. Sometimes those enemies were real (pharmaceutical companies) and sometimes they were not (the “deep state”), and quite often Trump’s bluster about battling those opponents was just that – talk. Still, one way Biden can keep his supporters energized and on his side, Shakir says, is to remind them that he’s fighting for them, day in, day out. “If there’s one thing to learn from Donald Trump’s politics – and there’s a lot we should disregard – it’s that he woke up every day looking to fight somebody,” he says. “It sends a message to those who are struggling that there’s someone in the White House who is fighting.”

And when Biden wins one of those fights and passes a key piece of legislation or an important executive order, he should take a page out of Trump’s playbook and promote the hell out of that victory, says Chuck Rocha, a longtime Democratic consultant who runs Nuestro PAC and led Sanders’ Latino outreach efforts in 2020. If Biden pushes for a \$15 minimum wage for federal contract work- [Cont. on 80]

POSTMORTEM Some moderates blamed the Dems’ poor showing in House races on progressive policy ideas like the Green New Deal and Medicare for All, but many candidates supporting those policies won their races. “The whole ‘progressivism is bad’ argument just doesn’t have any compelling evidence I’ve seen,” AOC tweeted.



Debt protesters marching to Philadelphia City Hall in 2019

MONEY TROUBLE

Forgiving Student Debt Alone Won't Fix the Crisis



MATT TAIBBI

JOE BIDEN says he supports canceling \$10,000 in federal student debt through legislation, while congressional progressives like Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.) say they want five times that amount wiped out right away, by executive order. *The New York Times* says the \$10K-versus-\$50K debate will be “one of the first tests of [Biden’s] relationship with the liberal wing of his party.”

If that’s the big question left to answer, it bodes poorly for solving the student-loan crisis, since wiping out a little or even a lot of debt won’t fix an inherently predatory system. This would be unsurprising, since political attention to this issue almost always involves one-time fixes that leave underlying causes untouched.

The 2019-20 Democratic primary season marked one of the first times student debt approached center stage in a national political debate. Discussion was driven by what Bernie Sanders called his “revolutionary proposal” to wipe out all \$1.6 trillion of extant federal student debt, as well as more moderate plans by candidates like Elizabeth Warren, who offered to eliminate up to \$50,000 per person, on a sliding, income-based scale.

The proposals came amid a seeming sea change in attitudes. By 2019, more than 50 percent of Americans said student debt was a “major problem,” and even a few scattered Republicans began arguing for forgiveness and/or

allowing student debt to be discharged in bankruptcy. Fed chair Jerome Powell said he was “at a loss to explain” why the law disallowed bankruptcies for student borrowers.

As the primary season progressed, the debate took an odd turn. When Biden took control of the race in the spring, he unveiled a proposal that sounded positively Sandersian, offering to wipe out all debt for people with incomes under \$125,000 who’d attended either a public college or a historically black college or university. But critics began appearing on both Biden’s left and right flanks. The finance sector argued that debt forgiveness was unfair to borrowers who’d paid their loans, while some Democratic pols argued that student debt is primarily an upper-class problem, making debt forgiveness a fetish issue for the advantaged class.

Talk to people whose lives have been ruined by student loans – I’ve interviewed the gamut, from people who’ve attempted suicide to people denied relief after crippling illnesses to people who moved into drug dealing to avoid wage garnishment – and they nearly all speak about one central, unaddressed problem. Student debt, they say, is simply too available to too many young, inexperienced borrowers.

As the holders of student loans get older (a great many will reach Social Security age still owing, in some cases with their principal untouched), many learn to see themselves as victims in an elaborate con, in which the Department of Education finances an escalating subsidy first for private banks and loan services, but more particularly for colleges and

universities. Combine a basically unlimited amount of available federal student debt with what has become a de facto societal requirement of a college degree for even the most menial professional work, and colleges can essentially charge whatever they want for tuition.

This is why, even though the rate of tuition growth has slowed somewhat in recent years, prices to attend school have far outpaced inflation for decades, while growing even faster when compared with other economic indicators (one study in 2018 suggested college tuition was growing nearly eight times faster than wages).

Preaching a gospel that more loans equals greater opportunity, especially for lower-income communities, politicians often argue for raised caps on federal loan programs like Pell Grants. One of the last acts of the late Sen. Edward Kennedy was to argue for the loan-expanding Higher Education Reconciliation Act (HERA) by saying lawmakers were “making college more affordable for young Americans.” As a New York Fed study from 2017 showed, the decision to raise so-called Title IV federal loans via HERA led directly to for-profit ed firms like the Apollo Education Group (which ran schools like the University of Phoenix) jacking up prices. At an earnings call in early 2007, an Apollo executive was asked why they raised tuition 10 percent, and not, say, five percent: “The rationale... had to do with Title IV loan-limit increases,” Apollo’s then-President Brian Mueller said. “It definitely was done under the guise of what the student can afford to borrow.”

The cycle is consistent. Politicians want to show they care, so they expand “access” to education. Schools in turn expand tuition costs and keep doing it because they have a basically captive customer pool that needs degrees to have any chance at professional salaries. This explanation is unpopular with some political liberals because it’s often seen as an argument for reducing access to higher education. As a result, it goes undiscussed by the only politicians likely to have any debate at all about the student-loan problem, i.e., Democrats.

The coming debate over whether to cancel \$10,000 or \$50,000 will of course be important to the 44 million-plus Americans who owe an average of \$37,584 in student loans. No matter how it shakes out, though, it won’t stem the tide of new debt holders. So long as universities keep building palatial dorms and libraries and paying for them by getting the signatures of teenagers on mortgage-like notes, the problem will continue.

Forgiveness is a good idea, or at least one that suggests politicians are finally hearing the sounds of distress emanating from voters. But any real fix will require changing both how young people pay for higher education and reassessing just how much value colleges are providing for all that money. Are middle-class workers spending decades breaking their backs to pay off a few years of pretty landscaping and Olympic-pool access? Or did they just overpay a bit for an otherwise sound investment? We have to ask what those big bills were for – not just how many of them to forgive. ®

PREDATORY LENDING

More than 44 million Americans hold an average of \$37,584 in student loans, and more than 50 percent of Americans see student debt as a “major problem.”

DANCING

IN

How Dua Lipa ignored the trends, turned herself into a ‘female alpha,’ and became the breakout pop star of the pandemic era by delivering the modern disco classic we didn’t know we needed

BY ALEX MORRIS

THE

DARK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID LACHAPELLE



W

E'RE STANDING NEXT TO a 15-ton meteorite when it occurs to Dua Lipa that, for maybe one of the first times in many months, her life is back to an approximation of what it might be in that very moment if the coronavirus pandemic had never happened. That is not to say that her day – which has involved waking up on luxuriant sheets in Manhattan's Bowery Hotel, wearing a black silk bralette as a bona fide shirt, eating a dessert that looks like a gilded egg atop a nest in a private dining room on the 101st floor of Hudson Yards, doing an interview for the Grammys, and wandering after hours in the American Museum of Natural History, a locale chosen for its tenuous connection to the disco-space vibe of her second album, *Future Nostalgia* – is normal, per se. But up until about a week ago, she should have been on an eight-month tour to promote *Future Nostalgia*, which she most certainly was not.

Now, it's mid-December, a week when the tour would have been over, when life would have gone back to some sort of pop-star version of "normal," doing the kind of things she's done today, even if she's currently doing them behind a black mask and in between a continuous series of Covid-19 tests. "I get tested all the time," she'd told me earlier from across a wide table, removing the mask to tuck into that gilded egg.

It was certainly not a year to cry for the suffering of pop stars (see: luxurious sheets, gilded desserts, after-hours VIP tours). But for Lipa – the breakout pop star of the pandemic era – the past nine months have been a study in how to not lose momentum when the world is pressing pause. Last winter, she returned home from Australia to find her London flat flooded and that plumbers, like the rest of the city, were in lockdown. She was thus living in an Airbnb with both a mini fridge ("I was like, 'This isn't going to work for a pandemic'") and boyfriend Anwar Hadid (regular model and brother to supermodels Gigi and Bella) when news hit in late

Senior writer ALEX MORRIS wrote about the effects of loneliness during the pandemic in July.

March that *Future Nostalgia* had leaked. As artists like Lady Gaga and Sam Smith were deciding to delay their album releases, Lipa's hands were tied: She took to Instagram Live to tearfully announce the album would be coming out early, right into the throes of a burgeoning global health crisis. She worried it would get lost in the much bigger story that was unfolding and/or that it might feel unseemly in the moment, a feel-good collection of uptempo bangers released amid a deadly crisis. "I was terrified," she says now, circling the meteorite. "But at the same time, I was like, 'For some people, this is a form of escapism?'"

It certainly was. As Lipa found herself promoting a new album from the sofa of her Airbnb, *Future Nostalgia* became the soundtrack to sock-footed solo dance parties the world over (or to twerking in your dining room, as she later put it on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*). Maybe none of us knew that this was the music we wanted to hear right then, but Lipa showed us that it was. "It was a little bit of a sucker punch," says collaborator Mark Ronson. "I don't think anybody was expecting Dua to deliver the great cohesive pop record of 2020, but there was a sonic cohesion in the way that *Random Access Memories* or *The Suburbs* or a Frank Ocean record feel cohesive – records that were made to sit together so people will buy it and digest it like that. And it hit right at the moment of lockdown."

The week of the album's debut, Lipa was the most listened-to female artist on Spotify – and the third most streamed artist on the planet. Lyrics like "Don't show up/Don't come out" and "I should have stayed at home" became quarantine memes. She was nominated for six Grammys, including Album of the Year, Song of the Year, and Best Pop Solo Performance. As Miley Cyrus put it, specifically about *Future Nostalgia* but also inadvertently summing up the collective conscious of 2020: "I need a fucking dance party!"

Suddenly, stuck at "home" making banana jerky with Hadid, months away from seeing a glam team or an *SNL* appearance, or even her own furniture, Lipa found herself becoming one of the most powerful women in the pop industry. "It's so crazy," she says now, talking about the actual meteorite, but also inadvertently summing up her own meteoric rise. "I mean, I didn't think it would look like that." The question was, what on earth to do about it?

IT'S SAFE TO SAY that even in a world without Covid-19, the success of *Future Nostalgia* was not a foregone conclusion. But it's also safe to say that Lipa is not one to leave things to chance. Certainly not when, as a teenager, she started recording herself singing covers in her friend's boyfriend's bedroom "studio." Certainly not when she took that "portfolio," as she puts it, to London clubs like KOKO, where she felt she'd inevitably encounter music-industry folks she could play said covers for. Certainly not when she got herself scouted at Topshop, signing with a modeling agency though she had no desire to actual-

ly be a model. "That was another thing where I was like, 'OK, this is something that maybe could help me get out there.'" And it did: Her agency hooked her up with a job singing for an *X Factor* ad, where she was introduced to a producer who had worked with Ed Sheeran and One Direction. That led to an offer of a publishing deal ("I was excited by it, but had no idea what it meant") and eventually to her manager, Ben Mawson, who got her signed with Warner.

Thus began several years of putting out singles, seeing what would stick. She quit her job at a restaurant called La Bodega Negra, but did so politely, assuming she might need to eventually go back: "In my head, I was like, 'Who knows?' I felt like I had so much proving to do." She distinguished herself with her work ethic. "I've seen her get off a plane and hit a double session," says producer Stephen "Koz" Kozmeniuk. "That's not normal. And getting thrown in a room with a million other people with three hours to write a song? It's super intimidating. But she was just relentless."

Lipa says that her 2017 debut was an exercise in finding her sound. "It was such an amalgamation of different genres that I'm passionate about, and discovering myself and my songwriting," she tells me. The album showcased the loveliness of Lipa's smoky voice and earned her a Grammy, but despite its obvious pleasures, it lacked an identity that could be singled out as Lipa's own. And her live performances didn't necessarily help her forge one, either. A YouTube comment on her appearance at the 2018 BRIT Awards – "I love her lack of energy. Go girl give us nothing" – became a full-on Twitter meme.

Still, the single "New Rules" became the moment's ubiquitous breakup anthem, enumerating all the things one was not to do with someone who'd recently broken one's heart (because, of course, "If you're under him, you ain't getting over him"). The song went multiplatinum, buoyed by the success of its video, in which a gaggle of stoic young women remind one another of the breakup rules as they stalk the halls of the hotel hosting their slumber party and brush one another's luxuriant hair.

It presented a view of female solidarity that emerged as a theme for Lipa, showing up in videos for "IDGAF" (populated by a diverse army of women in power suits) and "Blow Your Mind (Mwah)" (in which the fierce female ensemble projects tenderness toward one another and, at one point, hoists aloft signs reading "Dua for President" and "You Can Sit With Us"). More than just offering #SquadGoals, the videos offered a vision of a feminism so ingrained as to be implicit. Three months after the "New Rules" video came out, the Harvey Weinstein scandal broke and the #MeToo movement exploded. Suddenly, young women brushing one another's hair like that could be seen, at least within the parameters of pop, as performing a sort of political act – and it appeared that Lipa had already intuited this.

"It was this unconscious decision," she says of the solidarity theme. "It was just very much like, 'This is just what it is – me and the girls – and this is how we talk with our friends.'"



But Lipa kept talking, frequently pointing out the inconsistencies in how men and women are treated in the music industry. She called out Recording Academy President Neil Portnow's 2018 comment that female performers needed to "step up" by casually announcing in her 2019 Grammy acceptance speech for Best New Artist, "I guess this year we really stepped up." When she was chastised for attending Lizzo's 2020 Grammy afterparty at the Crazy Girls strip club in Los Angeles, she defended not just herself but women in general. "I just feel like, if you're a feminist, you have to also support women in all fields of work," she says. "We have to support sex workers, we have to believe that that [work] is their choice and their right. It seems quite hypocritical, I think, people picking and choosing as to how they want to support women and when it suits them. That's another form of misogyny, which really derives from the male gaze."

In fact, when in thrall to the natural beauty on display at the museum, I casually mention Lipa's own beauty, that the way she looks "maybe had a certain power," she goes quiet for a moment and then gives me a generic answer about feeling better when she's taking good care of herself. She's far too poised to be truly prickly, but still, I can tell that I've stepped in it. I gingerly steer the conversation back on track.

MOST POP STARS try to curate the way gazes come their way. Even offstage, they seem to want to be viewed as extraordinary beings, to be gawked at and adored. Lipa apparently does not. In the pop landscape, and especially in person, she comes across as extraordinarily down-to-earth. "She obviously looks like an iconic pop star, but there's nothing precious about it," says Ronson, who should know a thing or two about precious pop stars. "There's a lack of pretension or anything like that." Over lunch, Lipa had been warm and gracious not just to me but to everyone we encountered, from the waitstaff ("Peppermint tea, please"; "That's lovely"; "Thank you so much") to the nervous young pastry chef who whisked her (masked) into the kitchen to demonstrate the complex construction of her gilded egg ("So pretty"; "I love it!"). She'd asked about my kids and our experience of the pandemic (not remotely a given in these type of encounters) and responded thoughtfully to what I said, all while giving off an air of calm, like some wise, old soul stuck improbably in a 25-year-old's body. "I don't have two personas, an alter ego for who goes onstage," she told me. "I've never had that issue, figuring out, 'I'm going to be this character today, or this is who I'm going to play, or this is the role I want to take on.' It's hard for me to make stories up."

And why should she? When I'd asked whether the fondling of Miley Cyrus on the "Prisoner" video was a case of really good acting or some sort of messaging about her sexuality, she simply shrugged and said, "It was a very real mo-

ment." She'd also talked casually about her relationship with Hadid ("I'm very comfortable in the relationship, more so than any others") and the time she'd spent on his family farm in Pennsylvania this year: "Wake up around 9:00, 9:30, shower, get dressed, have a bit of breakfast, take the dog out on a really nice long walk, maybe do some yoga, make some lunch, hang out, watch a movie, play with the animals," which include cows, goats, and the horses that she's learning to ride ("I can do it gently; I'm not good"). Last Christmas, she gifted Hadid two pygmy goats, Funky and Bam-Bam, which she says make excellent pets. "You can take them inside," she marvels. "They love a cuddle."

For a pop star who is so perfectly palatable, cuddly farm animals and all, Lipa has also proved extraordinarily forthcoming about her political beliefs. She's vocally pro-Palestine. She's supported the Labour Party in her native U.K. and Bernie Sanders here in the States, even setting up an interview with him before the last election ("I thought it was a long shot – I mean, he's busy – but he was amazing"). "Online people are like, 'Just shut up and sing. What do you know? Why do you care so much?'" she says. "But I think people forget how small our world is. And it's getting smaller all the time."

She should know. Her family is Kosovar Albanian, refugees of the conflicts in the Balkans, and both of her grandfathers were historians. "My grandfather on my dad's side was

writing books about everything that was happening," she explains. "When the occupation happened, Serbian forces wanted him to rewrite history. He refused, and he lost his job. So it's part of who I am to stand by the things I believe in."

As the wars heightened, Lipa's parents left university (in addition to fronting a rock band called Oda, her dad was studying dentistry; her mom was studying law) to move to London, folding themselves into a community of Kosovo refugees who had coalesced in Camden to escape the regional violence of their home. Like so many immigrants, they forfeited the white-collar professional lives they would have had to work in bars and restaurants, often holding down multiple jobs and attending school at night. Lipa, whose first name means "love" in Albanian, was born three years after their move. At

age nine, she started spending her Saturdays at the Sylvia Young Theatre School, which Rita Ora, Tom Fletcher, and Amy Winehouse had once attended. A few lessons in, a voice teacher asked her to stand up and sing. Afterward, he bumped Lipa up to a more advanced class,

one that was full of teenagers. "I was terrified," she says, "but he was the first person to tell me I could sing."

Lipa grew up knowing that while London was her birthplace, it wasn't really her home. "With the refugee situation, people don't understand that people wouldn't leave their country unless there was a need for it," she explains. "The plan was always to go back to Kosovo." When she was 11, her family did, and she expected to finally fit in in a way she felt she hadn't in London. "And then I got there," she says, "and I was the Albanian girl speaking Albanian in an English accent." Eventually, she made friends and those friends introduced her to hip-hop (her first album was Nelly Furtado's *Whoa, Nelly!* – "And it just became my life" – though her first concert was Method Man and Redman). But she longed to return to London, to the music classes and the greater opportunities she sensed were there.

At 15, she persuaded her parents to let her move in with the daughter of a family friend in Camden. That she spent the rest of her teenage years basically unsupervised, making herself pasta and receiving orders to clean her room from several countries away, is a testament to the type of teenager she was: a late bloomer, a listmaker ("Do homework, have a shower, do my poetry – I would have a time scheduled for everything"), a driven kid whose one and only brush with the law involved throwing bath bubbles off a balcony and onto passersby just as a cop happened to be walking past, and who secured an "A" in math as part of a deal with her mom to get her bellybutton pierced. She was not part of the popular group at school, the girls she refers to as "not posh, but very English, a bit thoroughbred." Her best friends were, and still are, two girls who approached her one day while she was having lunch. "They were the first to be like, 'We know you're new, so we just wanted to come say hi and hang out.' I never let them go."

Female solidarity came naturally to Lipa, but empowerment took some time. Her impulse with her music was to write about her deepest emotions, but it was hard to enter a studio and lay her vulnerabilities bare for a producer she'd met only moments before. She learned to turn the emotion on its head, to imagine that she'd come out on the other side. "My music, a lot of it is what I hope. I hope to empower women," she explains. Take the motivational mantra that opens *Future Nostalgia*: "You want a timeless song, I wanna change the game... I know you ain't used to a female alpha." "Those [words] don't immediately come from something that I believe," she continues. "It's more that I start off with a false sense of confidence, and then the more I sing it, the more I perform it, the more I put it out into the world, the more I feel like I live it, breathe it, embody those lyrics and those words."

With her first album, she had ample opportunity to practice that embodiment: She performed 245 times for her first tour, a number she proudly has tattooed on the back of her left arm. By the time she met up with Ronson in 2018 to cut "Electricity" (which went on to win

"I'LL START OFF WITH A FALSE SENSE OF CONFIDENCE, AND THEN THE MORE I SING THOSE LYRICS, THE MORE I FEEL LIKE I LIVE IT, BREATHE IT, EMBODY IT."



a Grammy for Best Dance Recording), “‘New Rules’ was playing in every bodega that I ever went to,” he tells me. “And she just had such a great no-nonsense, boss vibe. There’s something about Dua that’s extremely powerful. You feel like she’s just kind of living her life and putting it out there for you. She’s just a boss.”

SOME TIME IN early 2018, somewhere in Las Vegas, Lipa was on a stroll when, in a “lightbulb moment,” the title of her second album came to her. “I just had that feeling of wanting it to be very reminiscent and nostalgic,” she says. “Something that touches on inspiration and the music that I listened to my whole life” – Blondie, Prince, Moloko, Eighties Madonna – “but also very current.” She texted her manager the idea, she says, “and he was like, ‘OK, I love the name,’ and I was like, ‘Just let me go with it. Let me get in the studio and see what kind of comes.’”

Which is what she did, teaming up with old collaborators like Koz, Sarah Hudson, and Clarence Coffee Jr. They worked in London at Abbey Road Studios. They went to Jamaica’s Geejam Studios in January. “And it pisses down rain the whole two weeks,” Lipa says with a laugh. “But it worked in our favor, got me ready to write again, to know what I wanted to write about and where I wanted to go.”

In sessions, Lipa gravitated toward tracks made with analog synths rather than computers, ones that had imperfections and intentionality, that seemed bespoke rather than easily replicated. To Koz, it “felt like an old-school project,” like the way music used to be made before it became a matter of “basically making little music loops, using the same sample libraries, a little guitar, drums, chop it up into a trap” – a sort of paint-by-numbers system that he credits with being “the reason everything sounds the same.” He continues, “When you get someone like Dua who wants to reject that system and do something more ambitious, it’s quite refreshing.”

Sessions would often start with Hudson reading tarot cards – “It gets you talking,” she tells me – and with Lipa laying out the bits of lyrics or themes she had accumulated since they last met. She talked about driving a car in space – an image that eventually lent itself to the album cover – and also “being with Austin Powers, that kind of Sixties, space-themed vibe.” Lipa laughs: “I say lots of random, stupid shit in sessions. But we all wanted to talk about this, like, intergalactic feeling of love.”

It helped that Lipa was in a different place writing this album. “When I was creating the first album, a lot of what was going on in my life was about heartbreak,” she explains. “This time around, I was feeling so happy and things were going so well, I was like, ‘OK, I need to be able to portray this feeling in a way that doesn’t feel cheesy to me.’ I don’t know why I thought that when you’re a pop artist and you make a happy song, then all of a sudden it’s just not cool. I kind of just had to let that go.” She didn’t

give ballads much thought. “There was a point where I was like, ‘Oh, everybody loves a ballad. Maybe I should make one.’ But that wasn’t what I was feeling. I was like, ‘Fuck it. It’s a fun record. That’s what it is.’”

The challenge, at least initially, was getting others to understand what it was, or what it should be. “We had been trying ideas and nothing was really clicking,” says Hudson. Then one day in August 2018, in the Sarm Studios in Notting Hill, “Dua was like, ‘I’m ordering doughnuts.’ And we were like, ‘Oh, my God, no, please. I don’t want to eat doughnuts.’ And we eat them all and get this insane sort of sugar rush and were bouncing off the wall, and that’s when ‘Levitating’ started to come out.” Koz played the track, Lipa started making up the melody, and they wrote the song pretty much all in one VoiceNote, including the word “sugarboo” – possibly the most inspired single word in any lyric of the past year – in homage to the nickname they have for each other.

The track nailed what Lipa was trying to accomplish. A few months later, after attending a disco night at a dive bar in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, songwriters Emily Warren, Ian Kirkpatrick, and Caroline Ailin – the trio behind “New Rules” – penned “Don’t Start Now,” which would become *Future Nostalgia*’s lead single. The album would go on to reference INXS’ “Need You Tonight” and White Town’s “Your Woman.” There would be shades of Olivia New-

ton-John and Eurythmics, mixed with more modern bass lines and Lipa’s strong, confident vocals. It would indeed sound like nothing 2020 had yet to offer. “It went against the grain of everything else,” says Koz. “It felt like music had just been so dark for so long. I mean, you walked into rooms and everybody just wanted to make, like, trap beats. And then here comes Dua, and she’s like, ‘Fuck that. A song should make you dance.’”

It’s possible that Lipa could have rested on her laurels, could have stayed on the farm cuddling the pygmy goats, and that *Future Nostalgia* would still have made people dance all over the planet. But that wasn’t her vision. Within days of the album’s release, and broadcasting from the rental with the mini fridge, she performed amid a grid of dancers and musicians for James Corden (with whom

she later recorded a socially distanced “New Rules for Covid Dating”). A week later, she was remote-appearing on *Jimmy Fallon* (with whom she later recorded a socially distant *Love Actually* parody). *Club Future Nostalgia*, a remix of the entire album, came out in August, unapologeti-

cally offering fans a club record for a year with no clubbing. And after giving up hope that 2020 would allow for a tour, she spent a large chunk of the fall in a bubble with backup dancers and other musicians so that they could create Studio 2054, a live virtual show that channeled the Eighties’ televised musical extravaganza *Solid Gold*, and that was, metaphorically, solid gold: When it went live in late November, more than 5 million people tuned in, setting a paid-live-stream record. Around minute 62, Lipa brought back a dance move for which she was once ridiculed. This time she owned it.

THE LAST TIME I talk to Lipa – over Zoom, the week after our meeting in Manhattan – it’s the day after her extremely belated *Saturday Night Live* appearance, the first time she’d performed for a live audience since her album’s release. It was the last *SNL* episode of 2020.


And while 2020 may have been Lipa’s year, it was certainly a cruel one – so cruel that maybe it wasn’t just her music that appealed, but also the gratification of seeing a very talented but very grounded woman unapologetically grab her own success when so much felt out of control otherwise. That’s the sense I get, at least, when Lipa now reminds me of the question I’d asked before, the one about the power of her beauty.

“I’ve been thinking about it almost every day, and I was just a little bit taken aback,” she says, politely but firmly. “I’ve never really seen being pretty or beautiful as some kind of power. It’s never been something that I identify with and – with no disrespect to you, obviously – I feel like I was a little bit shortchanged in a way, because I don’t feel like I’ve gotten to where I am because of that. I’m extremely hardworking and driven, and I feel like that’s the reason why I got to where I am, through my hard work and my drive, and I just wanted to make that clear because it has been playing on my mind.”

In the blip of silence that follows, my feminism tries to brush itself off. I’m tempted to point out that more than one thing can be true, that an effect can have many causes, and that I had merely wanted to gauge her own self-perception about a particular, non-exhaustive trait. But then I think of all those shows, all those times singing all those lyrics she’d written to convince herself of her own strength. I think of her in all those sessions, trying to go against the grain – and of what her sense of self means for her ability to do so. Sometimes, I reason, empowerment is a matter of will. Sometimes the feminism must be explicit.

So I apologize, and I do so sincerely. And of course, she is gracious and unprickly as always.

Just before we sign off for the last time, I ask what hardly needs asking: if the process of willing herself into empowerment is complete. “Do you feel like you’re a female alpha now? Have you internalized that?”

“I’ve internalized that, yes,” she says without hesitation. “I feel good.” 

**“AT ONE POINT
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THAT WASN’T
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RECORD. THAT’S
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ARTISTS

TO

Ten new musicians who are blazing paths, scoring big hits, and reshaping pop, hip-hop, Latin, punk, country, and more in 2021

WATCH

RINA SAWAYAMA

FROM London

SOUNDS LIKE Boldly original pop music that flits between sounds like turning a radio dial

GIVEN ALL THE strange and terrifying events of 2020, it may not surprise you to learn that a pop star chose to mash up Christina Aguilera-style Y2K melodies with Disturbed-ish nu metal on her debut album. Even so, Rina Sawayama's SAWAYAMA is still an unlikely – and exciting – pairing of genres. “It was like, ‘I only get one debut record, so what do I want it to sound like?’” says the Japanese British singer, 30.

Among the album's major themes is what family means to Sawayama – whether growing up with divorced immigrant parents, partying with indie-rock bands as a teenager, or finding a new queer community as an adult. When her career began, she recalls, she saw few prominent singer-songwriters of Asian descent in the U.S. or Britain (Mitski was one exception); now, there's a much wider swath of recognizable acts, from Awkwafina to Yaeji. Still, Sawayama knows personally how much remains to be done. Last year, she was ruled ineligible to be nominated for the prestigious Brit Awards or the Mercury Prize because she isn't a British citizen, even though she has lived in the U.K. for the majority of her life. She's now in conversation with those awards' organizers about how to revamp their guidelines. “Fingers crossed,” she adds. “I just need to see people recognized for their talents.” **CLAIRE SHAFFER**

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHIESKA FORTUNE SMITH

HAIR BY JAKE GALLAGHER. MAKEUP BY ANA TAKAHASHI. NAILS BY LAUREN MICHELLE PIERES. STYLING BY NATALIE ROAR. TOP BY BRUNA IGNATOWSKA. LOCATION BY YOYO STUDIOS. PRODUCTION ASSISTED BY AMY BELLWOOD.





**COMING
UP FAST**

Juarez, Johnson,
and Campbell
(clockwise
from top) in
November

MEET ME @ THE ALTAR

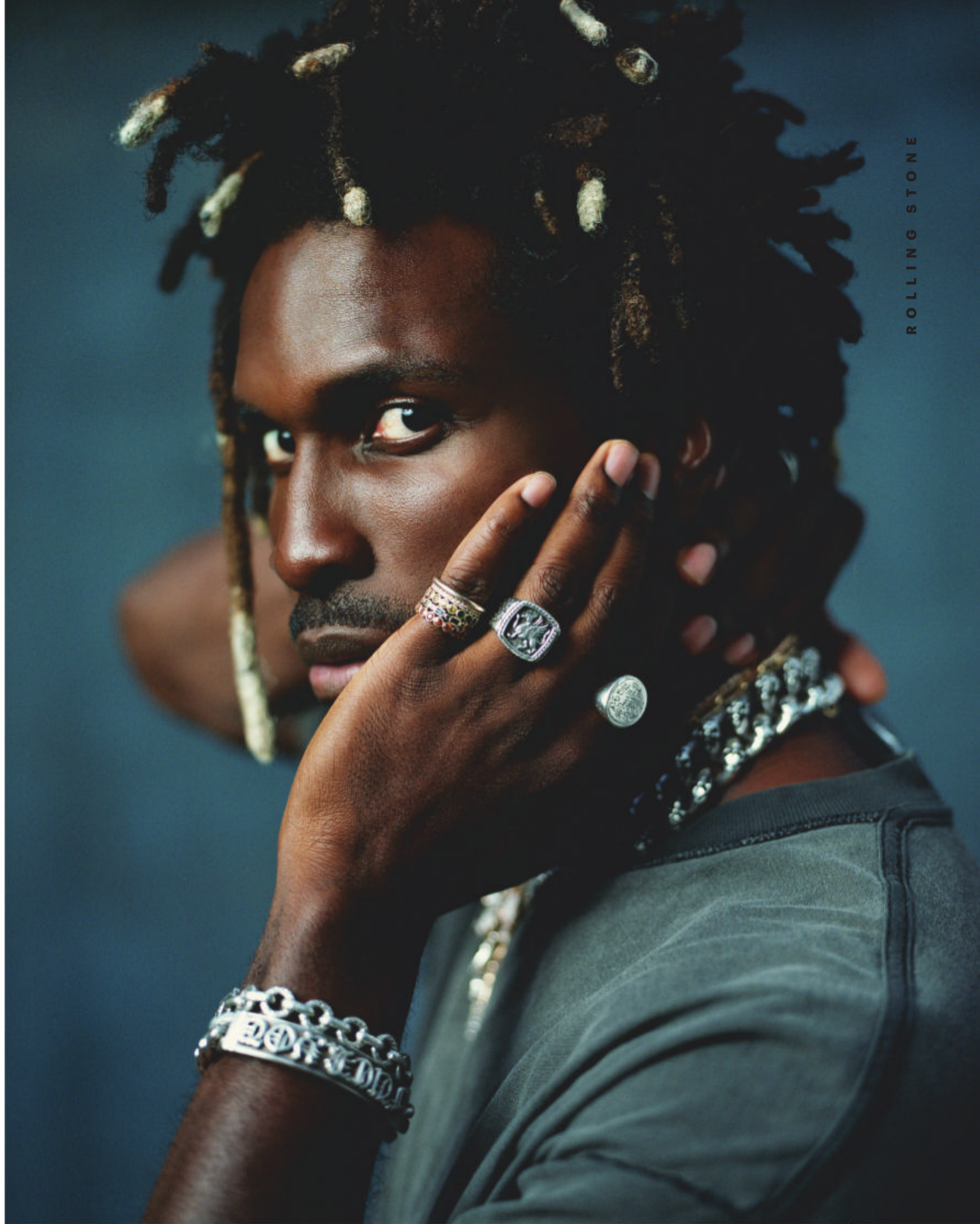
FROM Florida

SOUNDS LIKE Pop-punk thrills that will have you longing for the days of black eyeliner and studded belts

SINCE POP PUNK broke through in the Nineties, the genre's most prominent faces have been largely white. Now, as the music industry begins waking up to its history of race and gender inequality, one band is ready to rewrite that unspoken rule: Meet Me @ the Altar, one of 2021's most exciting new rock acts. Guitarist-bassist Téa Campbell, 20, and drummer Ada Juarez, 21, met online in 2015 after Campbell stumbled upon Juarez's drum cover of a Twenty One Pilots song. The two became fast friends despite living in different states (Florida and New Jersey, respectively), and later added Edith Johnson, 20, on lead vocals after she auditioned by singing Paramore's "All I Wanted." Last year, the trio signed with Fueled by Ramen, the Warner Music-backed label responsible for launching some of the band members' biggest influences, and rereleased the single "Garden" – an exhilarating blast of sticky-sweet vocals, fluttery electric riffs, and a dangerously catchy chorus ("Your flowers will finally grow!"). "I don't think any of us have fully wrapped our heads around [the record deal] yet," Campbell says. "We grew up idolizing these people our whole lives, and now we're on the same label as them."

Meet Me @ the Altar's fans include All-Time Low's Alex Gaskarth and the Wonder Years' Dan Campbell, and the band members have benefited from Halsey's Black Creators Fund, which offers financial support for black artists in need. But their rise hasn't been without challenges. They recall feeling unwelcome at early gigs: "We would have to play with the local bands, but they're all white dudes who didn't really want us there," Campbell says. "They were never explicit about it, but you can just tell."

All three members of Meet Me @ the Altar now live together in Florida, where Campbell still works a day job and Johnson attends virtual college classes. And while the pandemic has slowed them down a little, these black and Latina women are eager to give their favorite genre some of the diversity it's been missing for too long. "We knew going into this that it wasn't going to be easy," Campbell says. "But we accepted that we have to take the harder way so that the 12-year-old black girl looking up to us can do it the easy way." **BIANCA GRACIE**



ROLLING STONE

SAINT JHN

FROM Brooklyn

SOUNDS LIKE Bass-heavy beats and charismatic vocals, as heard on the omnipresent EDM-rap hit "Roses"

IN THE FIRST WEEK of January 2020, a remix of Saint Jhn's "Roses" flew into Spotify's Top 100, where it's stayed ever since. The original song is a swaggering rap ballad; the remix, by the Kazakhstani producer Imanbek, is closer to Euro house, with a bludgeoning bass line and pitched-up vocals. For some artists, that kind of disparity between their big hit and the rest of their catalog might be a cause for concern. But not for Saint Jhn. "If you're just hearing about me through the remix, I damn near gotta stop and clap for you," he says. "It's like people who are just discovering *Game of Thrones* right now. You're gonna have the greatest weekend."

The singer-rapper, who grew up splitting time between Brooklyn and Guyana, started as a professional songwriter. "I'm a hustler, and I had an opportunity coming from a place where opportunities don't happen very often," he says. After writing for artists such as Usher, he went solo – and hundreds of millions of streams have followed. His latest, *While the World Was Burning*, is full of tales of his triumphant rise and tortured romances, plus the "Roses" remix as a hook to draw in new listeners. "You missed a whole lot, but I'm excited for you to catch up," Saint Jhn adds. "Here's dynamite and a fishing pond. You ready? Now let's feast." **ELIAS LEIGHT**



RAUW ALEJANDRO

FROM Carolina, Puerto Rico

SOUNDS LIKE An eclectic vision of reggaeton with elements of R&B, trap, rock, and more

THE 2020 Latin Grammys opened with a splashy, star-studded homage to the salsa legend Héctor Lavoe. While a group of luminaries belted out the lyrics to “El Cantante,” 27-year-old Puerto Rican artist Rauw Alejandro sauntered onstage holding hands with reggaeton matriarch Ivy Queen. Wearing his signature braids and a burgundy suit adorned with gleaming chains, the smooth newcomer showed that although he’s known for R&B and reggaeton, he could just as easily glide in next to seasoned veterans and perform salsa. It was only the latest sign that Alejandro is one of the most charming and versatile stars in the world.

Growing up in Carolina, the Puerto Rican municipality where he still lives, the rapper and singer – whose real name is Raúl Alejandro Ocasio Ruiz – had dreams of being a soccer player, before an injury cut his career short and he pivoted to music. Some of his earlier work made it seem as though he would be at the forefront of an R&B wave in Spanish-language music, building on his love of Usher and Michael Jackson. But he also played with trap sounds, and his most recent songs have continued to spotlight reggaeton. “I couldn’t not do reggaeton,” he says in Spanish. “It’s in my culture. It’s in my blood.”

When the pandemic struck, Ruiz rented a house in Miami and hunkered down to finish his first studio album, *Afrodisíaco*. The record, which features collaborations with J Balvin, Rosalía, Sech, and Camilo, quickly spun off three hits, and it has helped Ruiz rack up the 3 billion-plus views he currently has on YouTube. Since then, he has been hanging out with his schnauzer, Taro; watching anime; jet-skiing with friends; and working on new music. “I have rock mixed with hip-hop, drum and bass, electronic music, even music that’s a bit more classic because I’m a huge fan of boleros, thanks to my dad,” he says. “Fusing modern styles with past roots is something that to me is really beautiful.”

He’d also like to collaborate with English-speaking artists like Cardi B, Post Malone, and Bruno Mars. But the most important thing is to keep the momentum he has going until live music returns. “The first party I get called for, the first concert or festival I book, I’ll be there,” he says, “wherever it is.” JULYSSA LOPEZ

TEDDY SWIMS

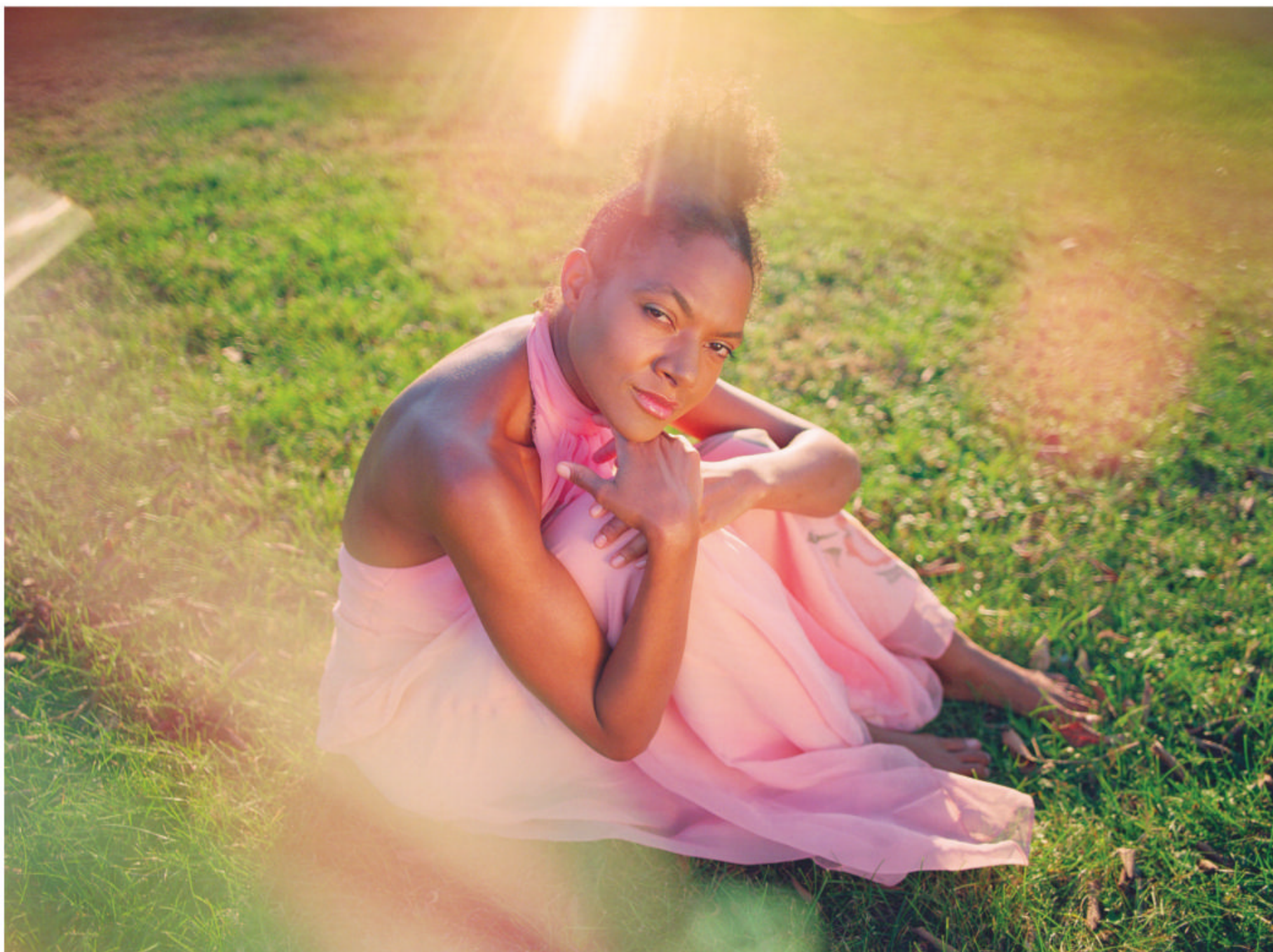
FROM Conyers, Georgia

SOUNDS LIKE A silky voice that slides right into country, hip-hop, and classic soul

WHEN JATEN DIMSDALE started putting cover performances on YouTube under the name Teddy Swims in 2019, he tried everything from H.E.R. to George Strait, just to see who was listening. “It turned out that people were liking everything, or they just liked the personality...or my voice,” Dimsdale says, calling from his home base in Atlanta. The bearded, tattooed 28-year-old – who grew up listening to Marvin Gaye and put in a few years screaming in a post-hardcore band – has gone on to win more than 1.5 million YouTube subscribers and a deal with Warner Bros. for his original music, which blends elements of hip-hop, country, and soul. “We ended up bridging gaps for people,” he says. “Maybe the 50-year-old man from Georgia, out on the farm, may have never heard a Summer Walker song, or may have never heard a Frank Ocean song, but because he loved my George Strait cover, he listens to it and he’s like, ‘You know what, I actually really like this song.’” JON FREEMAN







BENEE

FROM Auckland, New Zealand

SOUNDS LIKE Upbeat pop from an artist who celebrates all her facets — not just the shiny ones

'HAPPEN TO ME,” the first song on Benée’s debut album, *Hey u x*, kicks off with a line about her fear of dying in a freak accident. It’s a song about anxiety and dread, but the 20-year-old singer-songwriter — born Stella Rose Bennett — says it was a snap to write: “The sadder songs are normally a lot easier. They just have such intense emotions. It feels great venting it all out.” That instinct hasn’t steered her wrong yet. “Supalonely,” her hit single about feeling alone after a breakup, has raked in close to 2.5 billion streams worldwide; Elton John declared it music’s “next global smash.” For Benée, who was 19 when the song first started taking off on TikTok, pop music is all about connecting with listeners who need some solace. “I just want them to be able to relate to something,” she says through a half smile, “and feel some form of comfort.” **SAMANTHA HISSONG**

ALLISON RUSSELL

FROM Montreal

SOUNDS LIKE Multilingual roots music that blends blues and folk rock with gentle country balladry

ONBOARD A STORMY FLIGHT in July 2019, Allison Russell thought back to one of the most difficult periods in her life. She’d fled an abusive home at age 15, spending her adolescence roaming the streets, sleeping in graveyards, and playing late-night chess in cafes. “These are the best years of your life,” she wrote, reflecting on the phrase teenagers are so often told. “If I’d believed it, I’d have died.” By the end of the flight, Russell had finished writing a new song for her stunning solo debut LP, *Outside Child*. The album follows her work as a member of the banjo roots group Our Native Daughters, including 2019’s “Quasheba, Quasheba,” which she wrote in honor of an enslaved ancestor. “My childhood was awful,” Russell, 39, says. “But I have more agency than any of the women in my lineage prior to me. If they could survive, then I have to be able to.” **JONATHAN BERNSTEIN**



ANNA B SAVAGE

FROM London

SOUNDS LIKE Deep, moody singer-songwriter wisdom expressed in an unforgettable alto voice

ANNA B SAVAGE keeps writing about birds, but she's not sure why. Her debut album, *A Common Turn*, is full of corncrakes, doves, and in one punny instance, a song about terns. "I'm still trying to work this one out," she says. "When I was writing the album and I was really struggling with it – like pulling teeth – I had a dream where a version of me stood in front of me and was like, 'You've got half an album, and there are too many birds in it.'"

The inspiration may be unexpected, but Savage, 30, is learning to go with the flow. After releasing a buzzed-about EP in 2015, and touring with the likes of Father John Misty, the British singer-songwriter went off the grid for a few years in the midst of a painful breakup; through therapy and introspection, she eventually found her way back to making music. In addition to her distinctive, brooding alto voice, Savage has a way of meticulously working through life's conundrums over the course of a song – even if she doesn't always arrive at a solution. "I don't remember how to dance/The beats changed," Savage sings on her recent single "Dead Pursuits." "I don't remember how to be me/I'm not the same."

She uses her observant skill to lighter ends, too. Take the Leonard Cohen-riffing "Chelsea Hotel #3," where Savage peppers her memory of a partner who didn't know how to make her orgasm with dark humor. As her mind wanders to her own pleasures – and the music turns, well, climactic – she fantasizes about *Y Tu Mamá También* and Tim Curry in lingerie. "I like having that levity next to the depth," Savage says. "It's just kind of a human thing." **CLAIRE SHAFFER**



OLIVIA KAPLAN

FROM Los Angeles

SOUNDS LIKE Sad songs and cozy production, like a weighted blanket full of feelings

BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, Olivia Kaplan was balancing a few hustles – working part-time at a hip Los Angeles restaurant, teaching music lessons, helping out at the local farmers market – on top of music. After long shifts waiting tables, she'd head straight to the studio to work on her debut album. She didn't mind and, in fact, found that the arrangement boosted her creativity (the fancy wine she got through her job didn't hurt either). But it all changed last spring, when she lost those income sources and moved back in with her parents. "The irony is once I started getting unemployment, I could afford to mix and master my record," says Kaplan, 28. "Which says a lot about how expensive it is to be a musician."

Her unexpected change in course is good news for fans of homespun pop that cuts deep. Kaplan's album, *Tonight Turns to Nothing* (out this spring), is full of deftly crafted songs about challenging subjects – relationship letdowns, a friend's addiction – with instrumentation from top indie players like Alex Fischel (Spoon) and Buck Meek (Big Thief). "I have a problem with confrontation," Kaplan says. "In the period that I was writing a lot of these songs, I was trying to step out of a place of ennui. I'm trying to hone my arguments and the things that I'm trying to say."

She plans to tour as soon as she's able to, but for now she's spending her days at home, working on new music and tutoring a second-grader. "This is the thing about living in your house with your family," she says. "You sit and have an interview with *ROLLING STONE* five feet away from where you first picked up the guitar." **ANGIE MARTOCCIO**



24KGOLDN

FROM San Francisco
SOUNDS LIKE Unstoppable pop rap with emo influences and confidence to spare

THE ZOOM INTERVIEW has just begun when 24kGoldn, unprompted, calls himself “the Steve Jobs of the music industry right now.” It’s the kind of claim that only a 20-year-old with one of the biggest songs of the past year can say without a hint of irony. Goldn, whose real name is Golden Landis Von Jones, is the most successful artist to develop a musical career on TikTok since Lil Nas X. “I’m revolutionizing this shit,” he adds. Goldn is proud of the unclassifiable blend

of sounds in his music: He does plenty of rapping, but “Valentino” and “City of Angels,” his first two hits, feature emo-inspired vocals, and his chart-topping smash “Mood,” with its bright, beachy guitar-laced beat, is closer to song-of-the-summer pop. “Usually the world has to catch up to me, not the other way around,” he says. “Yeah, I’m a rapper, but I’m also a rock star, an R&B singer, and whatever the fuck else I want to be that day. I don’t box myself in. I’m just Goldn.” **ETHAN MILLMAN**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **SAMUEL TROTTER**



THE SPIRIT OF NEIL PEART

By
**Brian
Hiatt**

Rush's virtuoso drum hero lived by his own rules, to the very end. For the first time since Peart's passing, his bandmates and widow discuss his legacy and his final years



CLOSER TO THE HEART
Peart onstage at the
Public Auditorium
in Cleveland, during
Rush's 1977 tour behind
A Farewell to Kings

NEIL PEART

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EIL PEART made it only 10 months into his hard-won retirement before he started to feel like something was wrong. Words were, for once, the problem. Peart, one-third of the Toronto band Rush, was one of the world's most worshipped drummers, unleashing his unearthly skills upon rotating drum kits that grew to encompass what seemed like every percussive possibility within human invention. Before band rehearsals for Rush tours, he'd practice on his own for weeks to ensure he could replicate his parts. His forearms bulged with muscle; his huge hands were calloused. But he was also the self-educated intellect behind Rush's singularly cerebral and philosophical lyrics, and the author of numerous books, specializing in memoir intertwined with motorcycle travelogues, all of it rendered in luminous detail.

Peart took constant notes, kept journals, sent emails that were more like Victorian-era correspondence, wrote pieces for drum magazines, and posted essays and book reviews on his website. Despite ending his formal education at age 17, he never stopped working toward a lifelong goal of reading "every great book ever written." He tended to use friends' birthdays as an excuse to send "a whole fucking story about his own life," as Rush singer-bassist Geddy Lee puts it, with a laugh.

"I do a lot of my thinking that way," Peart told me in 2015. "There is a quote from E.M. Forster. He used to say, 'How do I know what I think until I see what I say?' For me, that's when I write."

Peart laid down his drumsticks after Rush's final show in August 2015, shortly before his 63rd birthday, but he intended to continue his writing career, which exacted less of a physical toll than pummeling an oversize drum kit. He envisioned a quiet life. He'd work nine-to-five in what he liked to call his "man cave," a garage for his vintage-car collection that doubled as his office, just a block away from his home in Santa Monica, California. The rest of his time he'd spend with Carrie Nuttall, his wife of 20 years, and his elementary-school-age daughter, Olivia, who adored him. He planned to spend summers with them at his lakeside country property in Quebec, not far from the former site of Le Studio, the

picturesque spot where Rush recorded *Moving Pictures* and other albums.

Before Rush's final tour began, Peart got a taste of the day-to-day existence he wanted. He ached to return to it, a rock star pining after mundanity like a cubicle drone daydreaming of living in the limelight. "It was awfully hard for me to turn away from a contented domestic life, a contented creative life," he told me in 2015, sipping Macallan in his garage just before the tour. "I'd wait till Olivia went to school in the morning and then come over here. I'm an early riser, as she is. I'd go pick up lunch and come back here. And again, I never take it for granted. I'll be walking down Olympic to Starbucks or to Subway or whatever, thinking, 'Isn't this great?'"

After the tour, Peart delighted in his new life. When he wasn't working in his man cave, he volunteered for library time at Olivia's school. "Olivia was thrilled," says Nuttall. "She got to see Daddy at school all the time." At night, he'd come home and cook family dinners. "He was living his life exactly the way he wanted for the first time in decades, probably," she says. "It was a very sweet, content time...and then the gods, or whatever you want to call it, snatched it all away."

"I just feel so bad," says Lee, "that he had so little time to live out what he fought so hard to get."

Peart started doing newspaper crossword puzzles back in the early Seventies, when he traveled to England from his native Canada to make it as a drummer, only to end up as the manager of a souvenir shop, with time to kill on a tube commute. For the past couple of decades, he made a ritual of whipping through the *New York Times* Sunday puzzle. In June 2016, he was baffled to find himself struggling with that task. "He couldn't figure it out," says Rush's longtime manager, Ray Danniels. "'What was the matter?'"

Peart kept his concern to himself, but by summer, he was showing signs of what Nuttall assumed to be depression. She broached the subject with Danniels during a visit to the manager's house in Muskoka, Ontario. "I was like, 'Carrie, he got everything he wants,'" Danniels recalls. "'He won. He got what he wanted, he got his freedom. He got a huge paycheck off the last tour. This is not depression.'"

In late August, Nuttall and Peart's mother both noticed that he was unusually quiet. When he did speak, he started "making mistakes with his words," as he later told his bandmates. He rushed to a doctor, and after an MRI, ended up in surgery. The diagnosis was grim: glioblastoma, an aggressive brain cancer with an average survival time of roughly 12 to 18 months.

Genetic testing of Peart's cancer suggested it was unusually treatable, and Peart lived until January 7th, 2020, more than three years after his diagnosis, which, in the case of this illness, qualified him as a "long-term survivor."

"Three and a half years later," says Lee, "he was still having a smoke on the porch. So he said a big 'Fuck you' to the Big C as long as he could."



▲ **FLY BY NIGHT** Lee, Peart, and Lifeson (from left) in 1977. Peart tried to end Rush's touring days as early as 1989.

SHORTLY BEFORE the surgery, Peart placed an uncharacteristic FaceTime call to Alex Lifeson, on the Rush guitarist's birthday. "It was so unusual to get a call from him, because he was never comfortable on the phone," says Lifeson. "You'd get these beautiful emails from him. But he wasn't that crazy about talking to anybody. I was in shock. But I could tell there was something weird. I thought maybe it was a difficulty with a connection or something. But he just didn't seem like he normally was. And I kept thinking about it afterwards."

Senior writer BRIAN HIATT wrote the Bruce Springsteen cover story in October.



THIS AND PREVIOUS SPREAD: FIN COSTELLO/GETTY IMAGES. 2

A couple of weeks later, Peart sent an email to his bandmates with the news. He didn't pull any punches. "He basically blurted it out," Lee recalls. "'I have a brain tumor. I'm not joking.'"

Lifeson was at a golf course when he got the message. "I think I started crying right there," he says.

"You go into fight-or-flight mode," Lee says. For Lifeson and Lee, the priority became finding chances to see their friend, who lived far from their mutual home base of Toronto.

Peart handled his illness with heroic strength and stoicism, friends say, even as he fought to survive. "He was a tough man," says Lee. "He was nothing if not stoic, that man.... He was pissed off, obviously. But he had to accept so much horrible shit. He got very good at accepting shitty

news. And he was OK with it. He was going to do his best to stick around as long as he could, for the sake of his family. And he did unbelievably well.... He accepted his fate, certainly more gracefully than I would."

There was a certain fatalism to Peart, who had written song after song about the randomness of the universe, and then had seen the events of his own life prove it to him. In 1997, his daughter Selena died in a car accident on the way to college; his common-law wife, Jackie, died of cancer soon after. Peart's loss was so all-encompassing that despite his rationalist bent, he couldn't help wondering whether he'd somehow been cursed.

"My daughter died at 19, and my wife died at 42, and I'm 62 and I'm still going," he told me in 2015, discussing his refusal to consider

quitting smoking (which is not believed to be a likely cause of glioblastoma). "How many people have died younger than me? How many drummers have died younger than me? I'm already in bonus time.... Something is gonna kill me. Look, I ride motorcycles. I drive fast cars. I fly around a lot in airplanes. It's a dangerous life out there. I like what one old-timer said about motorcycling: 'If you love motorcycling enough, it's gonna kill you. The trick is to survive long enough that something else kills you first.'"

For all of that bravado, he couldn't abide the idea of leaving his daughter behind. "That bothered him terribly," Danniels says. "It bothered him that he had come full circle. At first, he felt the pain of having lost a child. And now he was leaving a child."

NEIL PEART

Peart had his own mourning process to get through, says Nuttall, “for the future he was not going to have and for everything he would miss out on with Olivia, and with me, and with life itself. If anyone lived life to the fullest, it was Neil. And there was still much he wanted to do. When everyone says, ‘Oh, he was so stoic and accepted his fate,’ and all that? Yes, he did. But it also broke his heart.”

He was determined to make the most of his remaining time, just as he had always sought to maximize his days. “What’s the most excellent thing I can do today?” Peart used to ask himself. The answer often meant roaring through a national park on a BMW motorcycle before playing drums in an arena.

“He lived incredibly deeply and richly,” says one of his close friends, former Jethro Tull drummer Doane Perry. “He didn’t waste his time. Which might mean being on his own, reading a book at his place up in Canada on the lake — that was just as fully engaging as being onstage in front of tens of thousands of people.”

Peart’s lifelong need for privacy grew stronger. His illness was a closely kept secret among a small circle of friends, who managed to guard their knowledge to the very end. For Lee and Lifeson, who were doing interviews and fielding calls from friends and peers about rumors, the burden of concealment was heavy. “Neil asked us not to discuss it with anyone,” says Lifeson. “He just wanted to be in control of it. The last thing in the world he would want is people sitting on his sidewalk or driveway singing ‘Closer to the Heart’ or something. That was a great fear of his. He didn’t want that attention at all. And it was definitely difficult to lie to people or to sidestep or deflect somehow. It was really difficult.”

Peart always dismissed unnecessary discussion of unpleasant subjects with a hand wave and a hearty “never mind,” and that’s what friends heard if they tried bringing up his illness or treatment. “He didn’t want to waste his remaining time talking about shit like that,” says Lee. “He wanted to have fun with us. And he wanted to talk about real things right up to the very end.”

Peart never complained, Lee jokes, unless he “ran out of smokes.” “One time I arrived without any alcohol,” adds Lee, a serious wine collector. “And I’m famous for arriving at his house with what he used to call ‘your bucket of wine.’ And I didn’t bring it this one time. And he was just so appalled. So of course, the next day, Alex and I went to a wine store and made sure we arrived with a bucket of wine. And all was good again.”

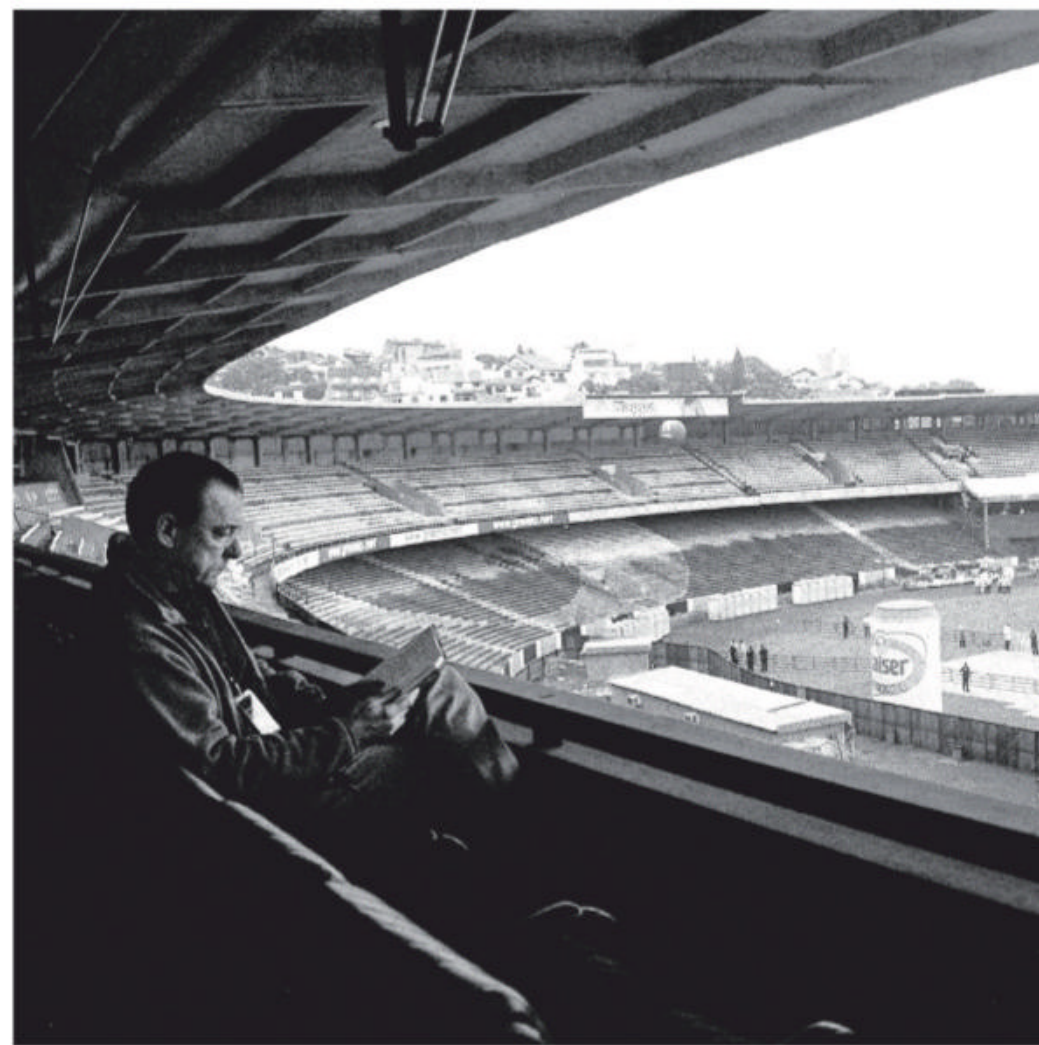
The drummer also overcame a lifelong aversion to retrospection and nostalgia, spending a significant amount of time listening to his catalog with Rush. “When we talk about his intense desire to be learning,” says another close friend, Vertical Horizon frontman Matt Scannell, “very hand in hand with that spirit is, ‘What’s new? What next?’ Back when I’d send him mix CDs, if it was old, he wasn’t interested. But I thought it was beautiful that he found something to enjoy about looking back, whereas before, it was kind of anathema.”

“I don’t think any of us listen to a lot of our old music,” says Lifeson. “It’s all been done and



▲ **TIME STAND STILL** [TOP LEFT] Rush in 1977. “Neil had a great smile,” says Lee.

▲ **GHOST RIDER** [ABOVE] Peart took to traveling from show to show on Rush’s tours via motorcycle, even at age 62.



played. But my guess is that he was just reviewing some of the things that he accomplished, in terms of music, anyways. And I think he was a little surprised at how well it turned out. I think that happens, you kind of forget. It was interesting to see him smile and feel really good about that. And when he still could write to us, he wrote about how he was reviewing some of our older music and how it stood up for him.”

Lee wasn’t surprised. “Knowing Neil the way I do,” he says, “and knowing that he knew how much time he had left, I think it was a natural thing for him to review the work of his life. And

he was finding himself very proud of how he had spent a big chunk of his life. And he wanted to share that with Alex and I. Whenever we saw him, he wanted to talk about that. He wanted us to know that he was proud.”

‘FLY BY NIGHT,” Peart’s debut album with Rush, begins with the intro to “Anthem”: guitar, bass, and drums interlocked in a brutally syncopated riff, in $\frac{7}{8}$ time, with some of the most crisp high-hat work the rock world had ever heard. From there, the

THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: FIN COSTELLO/GETTY IMAGES; FIN COSTELLO/RUSH ARCHIVES; FIN COSTELLO/GETTY IMAGES; CARRIE NUTTALL; JUAN LOPEZ



◀ **ANALOG KID** Beginning with Rush's earliest tours, Peart used downtime to read endlessly.

▲ **ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE** [TOP RIGHT] Rush sounded bigger than any ordinary three-piece.

▲ **MEAN, MEAN PRIDE** [ABOVE] Peart poses with Lifeson and Lee in London circa 1978.

song became a ferocious salute to Ayn Rand-inspired individualism. The Rand influence was powerful at that point for a young Peart, adhering to his public image for decades, but he'd soon regard it as philosophic and intellectual training wheels, at best. He'd eventually call himself a "bleeding-heart libertarian," and tell *ROLLING STONE* in 2015 that he planned to vote Democratic after gaining his U.S. citizenship.

On Rush's previous album, recorded with a far more limited drummer, John Rutsey, Lee had been singing come-ons ("Hey, baby, it's a quarter to eight/I feel I'm in the mood!") over bar-band

Zeppelinisms; now he was screeching objectivist philosophy over thrilling, twisty prog-metal, a genre his band was inventing moment by moment. "We wanted to be the most complex hard-rock band out there, that was our goal," Lee told me in 2015. "So I knew from the very first audition that this was the drummer of our dreams."

Peart spent his infancy on a family farm, before his father — who would run his own auto-parts business — moved the family to Port Dalhousie, a suburb of the small city of St. Catharines, Ontario. Until his teenage years, Peart's childhood was relatively idyllic. He spent much

of his time outdoors, cultivating a lifelong connection with nature. "Where he was really most comfortable was in nature and in quiet and a degree of solitude," says his friend Doane Perry.

There was one deeply traumatic incident. Swimming in Lake Ontario when he was around 10 years old, Peart grew tired and tried to grab onto a buoyed raft, before some older boys decided it would be funny to keep him off of it. Peart flailed in the water, feeling himself start to drown. At the last minute, two classmates saved his life. Peart was left with a certain distrust of strangers, and would flash back to the terror of that moment years later, when he was unlucky enough to be caught in a crush of fans. He developed a phobia of feeling "trapped" that would shape his profound discomfort with fame and his constant need to escape the cloistered world of rock touring.

Peart was brilliant enough to skip two grades, starting high school at 12. He began drum lessons, practicing for a full year without an actual kit. Peart's first spark of interest in drums came with a viewing of *The Gene Krupa Story*, a biopic about the big-band drummer; big-band jazz was Peart's dad's favorite music, and Peart would take a serious stab at playing it later in life. Keith Moon, the Who's wild-man drummer, became his hero, but as Peart's skills developed, he realized he didn't actually want to play like Moon. The chaos didn't suit him. Peart would find a way to embody Moon's energy while staying true to his own spirit, playing parts that were even flashier and more flamboyant, but also more precise and carefully composed, following a three-dimensional geometric logic. (Ever restless, Peart, in his later years, reversed course and worked on his improvisational side.)

Teenage Peart grew his hair long and started wearing a cape and purple shoes. Local jocks were unimpressed. "I was totally happy up until the teenage years," he told me, "when suddenly — I didn't know I was a freak, but the world made me aware of it." He was playing in his first bands and becoming completely obsessed with his instrument. He'd only stop practicing when his parents made him. "From the time I started playing drums, there was only drums and music," Peart said. "I did great in school up until that point, and then it just didn't matter."

He dropped out at 17, and by the next year made his way to London. He spent 18 frustrating months there, returning to Canada with very different ideas about his musical career. He decided he couldn't stand playing music he didn't believe in for money, and would rather work a day job and play for fun. "I set out to never betray the values that 16-year-old had, to never sell out, to never bow to the man," he told me.

He was offended by what he saw as pandering and corrupt commercialism in the rock world; there's genuine contempt in the line about the "sound of salesmen" he'd later write in "The Spirit of Radio." After a stint at the local record store, where he met the brothers of Jackie Taylor, his future wife, he settled into a job as parts manager at his father's business, where he helped computerize the inventory system.

NEIL PEART

Pearťs first attempt at ordinary life lasted barely a year before he was recruited to audition for a Toronto band already signed to a major label. Peart joined Rush, and began 40 years of recording and touring. “You look at him [in photographs] in the early days,” says Lee, “and he had a great smile. He was very happy for a very long time. Only after years of grueling road work did that smile start to wear away a little bit.”

From the beginning, though, Peart found the downtime on the road stultifying. He started putting it to use, plowing through ever-growing stacks of paperback books, filling in the gaps of his education. At the same time, he laced Rush’s early albums with some of rock’s most unusual and colorful lyrics, drawing at first on his love of science fiction, fantasy, and Rand, before shifting to more earthbound concerns by the Eighties. The band’s breakthrough, 1976’s monumental, riff-happy rock operetta “2112,” was dead serious in its furious salute to personal freedom; the priests of Syrinx, who controlled everything in their dystopian society, were a thin stand-in for the record execs who wanted Rush to sound more like Bad Company (and for teenage fans, parents who just didn’t understand).

There was more humor in the band and in Peart’s Seventies writing than some of his critics understood – 1975’s “By-Tor and the Snow Dog” was inspired, for instance, by the nicknames of two dogs Danniels owned. “I remember one morning saying to Geddy, wouldn’t it be funny if we did a fantasy piece on By-Tor and the Snow Dog?” Peart told me. Even in their peak-prog moment, 1978’s *Hemispheres*, the band was self-aware enough to give the wry subtitle “An Exercise in Self-Indulgence” to “La Villa Strangiato,” a twisty masterpiece of an instrumental.

“The Spirit of Radio,” from 1979’s *Permanent Waves*, lived up to its title, winning Rush extensive FM airplay, followed by their biggest-ever album, *Moving Pictures*. That LP included Peart’s awe-inspiring performance on “Tom Sawyer,” highlighted by some of the most indelible drum fills in rock history. Rush were now huge, and Peart wasn’t enjoying it. When he heard Roger Waters’ depiction of rock alienation on Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*, he wrote Waters a letter of appreciation for capturing his own feelings so well.

Pearť never achieved much comfort with his celebrity status. His friend Matt Stone, *South Park*’s co-creator, was stunned to find how ill-at-ease Peart could be about being recognized in public, even late in his career. “He was a really weird guy about his fame,” Stone says. (For that reason, Peart particularly loved Stone’s Halloween parties, where he could meet people while in disguise – which, one year, meant full drag.)

Pearť developed strategies to break free. “I carried a bicycle on the tour bus and sometimes on days off I’d go riding in the country,” he told me, “and then, if the cities were a hundred miles apart, I could do it on my own, and that was the biggest thrill. The whole entourage left, and I’d be in the little town in a motel room and on my own, and in those days no cellphones or anything. Just me and my bicycle.” He took extracurricular trips, too, riding through Africa

and China. The deprivation he witnessed in Africa was transformative, pushing the “bleeding heart” part of his libertarianism to the surface.

Pearť tried to end Rush’s touring days as early as 1989, when his daughter Selena was 11 years old. “After much wrestling in my own mind I came to the realization, if I’m going to call myself a musician, then I’m going to have to perform live,” he told me. “I like rehearsing much better than performing. It’s got all the challenge and gratification, but without the pressure. And you don’t have to leave home. Even in ’89, I was thinking, ‘Imagine if they had a hologram, so every day I just went to one place and played my heart out, and then went home.’”

Pearť felt intense pressure, night after night, to live up to his own reputation. “He never rated himself as highly as everyone else did,” says Police drummer Stewart Copeland, another friend. “But he did very much feel the responsibility that he carried to be the god of drums. Kind of a burden, actually.”

IN MAY 1994, at the Power Station recording studio in New York, Peart gathered together great rock and jazz drummers, from Steve Gadd to Matt Sorum to Max Roach, for a tribute album he was producing for the great swing drummer Buddy Rich. Peart noticed one of the players, Steve Smith, had improved strikingly since the last time he had seen him, and learned that he had taken lessons with the jazz guru Freddie Gruber. In the year of his 42nd birthday, while he was already widely considered to be the greatest rock drummer alive, Peart sought out Gruber and started taking drum lessons. “What is a master but a master student?” Peart told ROLLING STONE in 2012.

He was convinced that years of playing along with sequencers for the more synth-y songs in Rush’s Eighties catalog had stiffened his drumming, and he wanted to loosen back up. (For all of his efforts and mastery, there were some areas even Neil Peart couldn’t conquer: “To be honest, I am not sure that Neil ever fully ‘got’ the jazz high-hat thing,” Peter Erskine, who took over as Peart’s teacher in the 2000s, wrote affectionately.)

Rush as a whole were feeling some creative exhaustion on their next album, 1996’s *Test for Echo*, but Peart felt he’d done his best playing to date, thanks to a revamped sense of time. He also found a new way to make touring bearable, even pleasurable, traveling from date to date on his BMW motorcycle. “I’m out in the real world every day,” he told me, “seeing people at work and going about their daily life, and having little conversations in rest areas and gas stations and motels, and all the American life every day.” Five years would pass before the band toured again.

On August 10th, 1997, Peart and his wife Jackie helped 19-year-old Selena pack up her car as she

prepared to drive to the University of Toronto to begin her sophomore year. Her expected arrival time came and went without a phone call. A few hours later, a police officer came to Peart’s door. At Selena’s funeral, Peart told his bandmates to consider him retired, and Lifeson and Lee assumed the band was over. Jackie was shattered, and within months received a diagnosis of metastatic cancer. She responded “almost gratefully” to the news, Peart wrote. Jackie died in June 1998. She is buried next to their daughter.

Pearť left everything behind, got on his motorcycle and rode. He felt alienated from himself; at one point, he watched one of his old instructional drum videos and felt like he was looking at a different person. There was part of him left, though, “a little baby soul,” and he did his best to nurture it. There were times when he sought the “numb refuge of drugs and alcohol,” as he put it in his memoir of the period, *Ghost Rider*. Midway through his journey, before embarking on a run through Mexico,

Pearť broke out of his isolation for a week, spending some time in Los Angeles with Rush photographer Andrew MacNaughtan.

One of the few things that made him laugh during that period was *South Park*, so Peart was pleased when MacNaughtan introduced him to Stone. “Andrew was like, ‘Neil’s coming to town,’” Stone recalls. “‘Let’s get wasted and hang out.’ I got some party materials and went up to the Hollywood Hills. Because of what happened, it was, ‘Don’t talk about girls. Don’t talk about children.’ So we talked about art and philosophy and rock & roll and travel. . . . But it was a guy who was just fucking sad.”

Over the course of more than a year and 55,000 miles’ worth of motorcycle trips, Peart began to heal. He ended up in Southern California for good, ready to start over. “When I first moved here it was remarkable, because my life was one suitcase, a bicycle, and a boom box,” he told me. “All the possessions I had. I rented a little apartment by the Santa Monica Pier. And I joined the Y here. I would do yoga or the Y every day, ride around on my bicycle, come home and listen to my boom box, and it was great.” Through MacNaughtan, he met Carrie Nuttall, a gifted photographer, and fell in love. They married in 2000. Peart called the band and told them he was ready to get back to work.

RUSH WERE AS POPULAR as they had ever been by their 40th anniversary in 2015, having been belatedly absorbed into the classic-rock and pop-culture canons. After many stylistic reinventions, they had re-embraced their core approach with what would turn out to be their last studio release, the triumphant concept album *Clockwork Angels*, in 2012.

“I gave him a big hug and kiss,” says Lifeson of one visit with Peart late in the drummer’s life. “He looked at me and said, ‘That says everything.’”



But Peart had again grown reluctant to tour. He and Olivia, now five, were very close, and during the band's 2012-13 tour, she found his absences painful and disturbing. Peart relented only because Lifeson had developed arthritis, and the guitarist worried that it might be his last chance to play. "Realizing I was trapped," Peart wrote, "I got back to my hotel that night and stomped around the room in a mighty rage and an attack of extreme Tourette's." After the tantrum subsided, he decided to follow an adage of Freddie Gruber's: "It is what it is. Deal with it."

As the tour went on, Lifeson started feeling better. It was Peart who suffered. He kept up his motorcycle routine, a 62-year-old man riding hundreds of miles a day, sometimes in the rain, before playing three-hour concerts. He developed a painful infection in one of his feet, among other issues. "He could barely walk to the stage," says Lifeson. "They got him a golf cart to drive him to the stage. And he played a three-hour show, at the intensity he played every single show. I mean, that was amazing."

At the beginning of the tour, Peart was feeling good, and signaled to Danniels that he might be open to adding more shows. His feelings changed along with his physical condition. "Part-way through the second run," says Danniels, "he made it clear to me, 'I can't do any more. I don't

▲ **A FAREWELL TO KINGS** For the first time, Peart took a bow with his bandmates, at their final show, in 2015.

want to do any more.' And, you know, I was frustrated." So was the band, which was in the middle of one of its greatest tours, with a fan's-dream set list that ran through its catalog in reverse chronological order.

"My relationship with him had been one of coaxing," Danniels adds. "But even getting angry couldn't move him. He wasn't a racehorse anymore. He was a mule. The mule wasn't going to move. . . . I eventually let go. I realized I was going to negatively affect my friendship with him."

The band never really spoke about the significance of what was happening at Rush's final show, at a sold-out Forum in L.A. At least not aloud. "The conversation took place onstage," says Lee, "all through the show, in our eyes." Peart made it clear that something unique, and most likely final, was happening when he came up to the front of the stage with his bandmates at the show's conclusion. It was the first time he had done so in 40 years. "That was a beautiful moment," Lee says.


For all the finality, there was always some hope that the band would find some way to continue. "Do I think Neil would have done something again?" says Danniels. "Yes. He would have one day. [Something] different, whether it was a residency in Vegas or whatever. I think, yes, before the illness. That's what stopped this thing from ever coming back."

THE YEARS of Peart's illness were filled with uncertainty. Early on, he was in remission for a year before the cancer returned. "In a way, every time you said goodbye to him, you said *goodbye*," says Lee. "Because you honestly didn't know. Even when he was doing pretty well. It was three and a half years of really not knowing. The timeline kept moving. So when you said goodbye, it was always a giant hug."

During one visit, Lifeson stayed in L.A. by himself for a few days. "And when I left, I gave him a big hug and a kiss," the guitarist says. "And he looked at me and said, 'That says everything.' And, oh, my God. And that, for me, was when [I said goodbye]. I saw him a couple times afterwards, but I can see him and feel that moment."

The final time Lee and Lifeson saw their bandmate, they were able to have one last, glorious boozy dinner with him and Nuttall. "We were laughing our heads off," says Lifeson. "We were telling jokes and reminiscing about different gigs and tours and crew members and the kind of stuff we always did sitting around a dressing room or on a bus. And it just felt so natural and right and complete."

Peart had some degree of impairment as the disease progressed, but "really, right up to the end, he was in there," says Perry. "He was absolutely in there, taking things in." [Cont. on 80]



The REVOLUTIONARY VISION *of* DAVID FINCHER

The boundary-pushing director reflects on his career,
Hollywood's golden past, and its perilous future

BY DAVID FEAR

PHOTOGRAPH BY GARY OLDMAN

WHEN DAVID FINCHER sat down with Netflix executives in the spring of 2019, he did not expect to be handed the equivalent of a blank check. Sure, the 58-year-old filmmaker – a former music-video wunderkind best known for pushing the envelope with baroque serial-killer thrillers (*Seven*), toxic-masculinity satires (*Fight Club*), and social media origin stories (*The Social Network*) – had helped kick off the golden age of streaming with the outlet's first original series, *House of Cards*. But he was used to resistance: You can't have this budget. You can't tell that story. ¶ So when his patrons said they'd help him make anything he wanted, Fincher thought of a long-dormant labor of love: a script his late father, Jack, had written about the making of *Citizen Kane*. Not the tale of its director, producer, star, and disputed co-writer, Orson Welles, who, at 26, took Hollywood by storm. This was the



DAVID FINCHER

story of Herman Mankiewicz, the alcoholic screenwriter who the famed film critic Pauline Kael insisted was the script's true guiding force – and who inserted a personal grudge against the rich and powerful into the greatest movie of all time.

Fincher wanted to shoot it in black and white. He wanted visual nods to movies of the Forties, as if the film had been discovered in a vault after 80 years of gathering dust. Also, it would involve an obscure chapter in California's political history concerning Upton Sinclair's 1934 run for governor and a disinformation campaign allegedly run by studio execs. Fincher couldn't believe it when Netflix said yes.

To see *Mank*, however, is to know why they did. An audacious, complicated, stylistically daring yarn, the movie is a hat tip to a bygone era that makes you feel like you've mainlined a day's worth of TCM programming. But it's also a challenging drama about complicity, the price of speaking truth to power, and the manipulation of media, which couldn't make it feel more urgent.

Over a four-hour conversation from his home in Los Angeles, Fincher discussed bringing this tribute to his father (who died in 2003) to the screen, his reputation as a taskmaster on set, why he's sorry *Fight Club* pissed off a fellow filmmaker, and more.

How did your father end up writing the *Mank* screenplay?

My dad wrote for a lot of magazines: *Psychology Today*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Reader's Digest*. He'd written a novel in the 1950s or Sixties, I think, and burned it. He'd written a couple of screenplays in the 1970s. After he'd retired, he was looking for a challenge, and told me, "I'm thinking about writing a script. What is a story you would like to read about?"

When I was growing up, he always told me *Citizen Kane* is the greatest movie ever made. That was received wisdom, long before I ever had the chance to actually see it, when I was 12. We'd talked in the past about that Pauline Kael essay, "Raising Kane," and the entire time he'd been telling me about the power and influence of that movie, Herman Mankiewicz's name never came up. So I said, "Hmm. It's always fascinated me, this friction between Mankiewicz and Welles in making *Citizen Kane*. No one's told that story." And he said, "Oh." I mean, he wanted a challenge! [*Laughs*.] I didn't even think he'd finish it.

Why not?

Listen, when I was 12 or 13, someone showed my dad a magic trick, something with cards that was alphanumeric. He became obsessed with this thing, and literally stopped eating and sleeping for about six, seven days as he figured it out. He was prone to disappearing down rabbit holes.

Did you get that trait from him?

I would file that under the dime-store psychology of Rosebud [*laughs*], but no. I got my work ethic from my mother: "Whatever you do, do with your might, things done by halves are never done right." And

my father had a kind of endless inquisitiveness. So I think I ended up with 22 chromosomes of each.

Do you think your dad connected with Mankiewicz?

I feel like Mankiewicz felt like he was slumming – he's this jaded New York writer who doesn't have a lot of reverence for this newly minted art form in Hollywood – and that as a magazine writer, my dad could relate to him in that way. And y'know, as a music-video director, I could relate, too.

What do you mean?

I mean, I've made Michael Jackson videos, and people were going, "Oh, my God, they're so great!" And you go, "Yeah, but I mean, it's a Michael Jackson video. Let's not blow this out of proportion here."

There are a lot of people who would assume you'd see a kindred spirit in Welles as opposed to Mankiewicz, because...

I definitely do.

...you came to Hollywood with a proven track record in something besides feature filmmaking. You had success at a very early age and started your own company. And—

"THERE'S THIS NOTION MOVIES ARE DYING. THEY'RE NOT. THEY'RE JUST CHANGING. YOU CHANGE WITH THEM. PEOPLE WILL DO THINGS WE HAVEN'T YET IMAGINED."

And I have a goatee, but... [*laughs*] I want to be really clear, because it's become such a fucking issue with the press on this film: I'm a huge Orson Welles fan. I stand on his shoulders every day. He was a genius, and this movie is not designed to take any of that away from him. *Citizen Kane* is an Orson Welles jam. But there were certain things underneath it that are definitely a Mankiewicz jam. Moviemaking is a collaborative effort. It just is.

But there are a few name-brand directors around today, and you're one of them. Your name means something.

Look, I go to see Steven Soderbergh movies because I know it's going to be a story that's deftly told. I go to Sam Mendes movies because I know there's going to be an attention to detail. But I'm talking about the fantasy of the auteur theory, which is that you can etch something in granite, wheel it into a preproduction meeting, say, "This is what the movie is. I'll be in my trailer." And that can be imparted to 85 people who can then execute your "vision." It's not how the process works. It's not how I think. It's more like, "How do I tell this story as well as I can tell it?" If you do that more than three times, you're doing good.

Your dad was close to 60 when he first started working on this, right?

He was around that age, yeah, and there was no doubt that there's a very... I mean, I feel it now. I didn't feel it at the time. You know, I was 30 years old. So, to me, the midlife-crisis aspect of it was lost on me at the time. I was too young to appreciate it.

Now, I can see he was going through things about the legacy of Mankiewicz, and his own legacy, that I may have been dismissive of. I'm not dismissive about those things now.

The movie climaxes with a long sequence of Gary Oldman's Mank laying into a bunch of rich folks at one of William Randolph Hearst's costumed dinner parties. Roughly how many takes did it require to get that scene right?

OK... [*sighs*] so let us now get into the notion of "He does so many takes," because this is a narrative that has lost its bridle. We shot that scene for three-and-a-half to four days, just that one scene. I think we did 10 or 12 takes per setup, and we probably did 40 setups with two cameras to get all of it. Granted, it's a lot of work for Gary. He's got to gird himself, and he's got to let loose. It's exhausting. I think it gives the actors a different sense of beginning, middle, and end, however, and I think that's an important thing. So, this whole thing of "Oh, the opening of *The Social Network*, it's 99 takes!" Well, it's 99 takes over two nights and 12 setups. I think that there's an inherent lack of understanding over how this works. I'm not

here to say that I make it as easy on everyone as I possibly can, but...

So your reputation as the filmmaker who does 70 takes of every scene...

But I don't! I don't do 70 takes of everything!

...is incredibly overinflated?

Yeah. Look, if you do 14 takes and on average you use take 12, that's not bad. If you do 14 takes and you almost always use take two, your

process is probably not working for you [*laughs*].

I used to be much more sheepish about saying, "OK, let's do another one," because I had been led to believe, in the same way that an actor would think, "You want another one, what am I doing wrong?" You're not doing anything wrong. And by the way, I'm not doing anything wrong by asking you for another one. What we're trying to do right is make this whole thing seem effortless and like it just fell off the truck that way. And I feel like that's my responsibility.

When you signed up to do *House of Cards*, did you have any sense that you'd be facilitating this massive paradigm shift in television?

First of all, I never got a call from Netflix saying, "Hey, how would you like to be involved in a paradigm shift?" That didn't happen [*laughs*]. But I was interested in longer-form storytelling, and it probably started with watching the cold embrace of a mass audience to *Zodiac* [Fincher's 2007 slow burn about the hunt for the Zodiac Killer]. I'd thought, "Well, two hours and 45 minutes isn't that long." But apparently it was. Just getting people to come to the theaters for a movie that long proved to be a bridge too far. For the most part, people who are spending 15 bucks to see a movie, they want something that's shaped like an arrow and traveling as quickly as possible to its intended destination. The notion of a narrative in which you're three hours in and something happens that's going to cause you to completely reassess what you thought of one of the lead characters? That's interesting.

Senior editor DAVID FEAR profiled actor Cristin Milioti in July.



PICTURE PERFECT

Fincher on the California set of *Mank*. “What we’re trying to do right is make this whole thing seem effortless,” he says, “like it just fell off the truck that way.”

So you were already thinking about television when Netflix came calling?

I never saw a place for myself in network television. At one point, I had been offered a chance to direct the pilot for *Deadwood*. I met with David Milch, who I was enormously impressed with, and when I read the script, I thought, “It’s not television, it’s HBO!” [Laughs.] I was even more intoxicated with the idea of doing something that sprawling. When *House of Cards* was picked up, one of the things we said was, “We want you to think of the remote as the paper-back by your bed. There’s a Chapter One, a Chapter Two.... It’s a thing you check in and return to.”

It’s the beginning of Binge TV.

I remember hearing Netflix getting pushback for the idea of uploading all 12 or 13 episodes in one day. Folks at CAA were saying, “We want to be part of the watercooler conversation. We like the HBO model.” And I spoke up and said, “Guys, it’s just a different watercooler conversation. It’s what chapter you’re on.”

Early in your career, you were part of a wave of filmmakers who helped define a certain type of Nineties movie, which all culminates in 1999 —

that’s arguably the best year for American filmmaking since 1974.

What came out in 1974?

***The Godfather: Part II*, *Chinatown*, *The Parallax View*, *The Conversation*, *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*...**

The Godfather: Part II is a pretty good movie [laughs]. OK, I’ll buy it.

In ‘99, it was *Being John Malkovich*, *Three Kings*, *Magnolia*, *Election*, *The Matrix*, to name a few. Did you feel like you were part of something bigger happening at the time, or was it more like, “I’m not trying to start a revolution...”

“...I’m just trying to make my little movie before anyone realizes how homoerotic it is”? The second one [laughs]. I remember seeing the trailers and saying, “Um, I’m not so sure the World Wrestling Federation market that you’re aiming this at is going to appreciate the homoerotic overtones of what it is that we’re selling.”

Yeah, there were a lot of interesting movies that had been in development for a long time, and then they all happened to come out at the same time and cross over. I certainly was not, you know, going to

dinner with Spike Jonze going, “It’s such an exciting time to be alive, is it not?” [Laughs.] He was like, “I’m acting in a David Russell movie... and everyone’s in a fistfight!” We had bigger problems. I see what you’re saying. But in 1999, I was in a bunker with my head down making *Fight Club*.

A movie so controversial that another filmmaker wished cancer on you. [In a 2000 ROLLING STONE interview, Paul Thomas Anderson said that after seeing 30 minutes of *Fight Club*, he thought, “I wish David Fincher testicular fucking cancer.”]

[Laughs.] Yeah. Look, I’ve been through cancer with somebody that I love, and I can understand if somebody thought... I didn’t think that we were making fun of cancer survivors or victims. I thought what Chuck [Palahniuk, on whose book the film was based] was doing was talking about a therapeutic environment that could be infiltrated or abused. We were talking about empathy vampirism. Cancer’s rough. It’s a fucking horrible thing. As far as Paul’s quote, I get it. If you’re in a rough emotional state and you’ve just been through something major.... My dad died, and it certainly made me feel different about death and suffering [pauses]. And my dad probably liked *Fight Club* less than Paul did.

Have your feelings about social media changed since you made *The Social Network*?

I don’t really know anything about social media.

You may not be an active participant, but I’m sure you’ve been following the news: Facebook has not really been clamping down on misinformation — in fact, seems to be amplifying it. Do you feel like social media has something to answer for, regarding the moment we’re in?

Censorship is a slippery slope. I will definitely say if something’s factually inaccurate, it’s really great that people are pointing that out. How that is interpreted is always the crux. Listen, I’m close to 60 years old. So I have trusted news sources, and I don’t really... I don’t do the Facebook, and I never did. I’m not saying that I didn’t go to high school with really fascinating people [laughs], I’ve just never particularly wanted to check in with them. I waste my time with other shit that’s probably just as infinitely stupid.

You’ve talked about movies now basically being either “spandex summer” vehicles or “affliction winter” prestige films, and how your work doesn’t fit into either category. Do you feel like you’re the last of a dying breed of a certain type of filmmaker?

No, I don’t think so. There will always be people who are poking and prodding and digging and searching for new ways to do the same thing, and new ways to do things that we haven’t even yet imagined.

Look, directing movies is a little like painting a watercolor from three blocks away through a telescope with a walkie-talkie and 90 people holding the brush. And as frustrating as that sounds, it’s also thrilling and invigorating when it comes off.

There’s this notion that the movies are dying. They’re not. They’re just changing. You change with them. I think anyone who, like me, is curious about how to impart their story, there’s going to be plenty more opportunities, at least in the short term. And depending on how long this pandemic goes on, there may be need for a lot more. 📽️





Highway to Hell

The \$300 million Kabul-Kandahar road was meant to be a symbol of the new Afghanistan. But a dangerous trip down it today reveals everything that has gone wrong in America's longest war

By Jason Motlagh

Photographs by
Andrew Quilty

FROM THE WRECKAGE

A store along the highway recently destroyed by a car bomb. The Taliban constantly attack along the road and then use the rubble to stage new ambushes.

It's past 10 a.m. on a Tuesday morning and Zarifa Ghafari is running late for work.

Six days a week, she commutes from her home in Kabul to Maidan Shar, the embattled capital of Wardak province, where she serves as the youngest female mayor in the country. Her office is just 30 miles southwest of the Afghan capital. But getting there requires a drive down National Highway 1, a massive U.S.-built showpiece once hailed as “the most visible sign” of America’s commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan after decades of war. Seventeen years after its completion, the highway is a glaring symbol of America’s failures, scarred with bomb-blast craters that snarl traffic and under constant attack from a resurgent Taliban. “Every time I leave home I’m thinking this trip might be the last one,” says Ghafari. “This dangerous road could decide my fate.”

On the outskirts of Kabul, we detour around a bridge that recently collapsed. The asphalt starts to fall apart, and four lanefuls of traffic are soon jockeying for position on what’s left of the two-lane highway. Ghafari’s bulletproof SUV lurches to an abrupt halt, boxed in by incoming trucks on one side and impatient southbound cars on the other: a bad situation. Her driver jumps out, AK-47 slung over his shoulder, to clear a path out of the jam, leaving the mayor unguarded.

“The Taliban like to hide and attack from the trees and homes along the road,” Ghafari says, scanning her surroundings through the bullet-riddled windows of her car. “Anything can happen here.”

Since becoming one of Afghanistan’s first female mayors, Ghafari has survived multiple assassination attempts, including one in March, when gunmen sprayed her Toyota compact with bullets in Kabul, missing her fiancé’s head by inches. After months of ignored requests, an armored vehicle was provided by the cash-strapped government. “If the Taliban get the chance, definitely they will kill me,” she says. “I’m on their blacklist.”

Slight and poised, with a midnight-blue headscarf and oversize glasses, Ghafari is just 27 years old. She is a bold testament to how far Afghan women have come since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion that ousted the extremist Taliban regime. As a child, she was forced to attend a secret school

for girls just to get an education. In the post-Taliban era she has thrived, earning a university degree in economics and launching a U.S.-funded radio station in Wardak aimed at women. In 2018, President Ashraf Ghani chose her over 137 other candidates – all of them male – to be mayor of Maidan Shar, the seat of a strategically important province bordering Kabul where the Taliban enjoy support. “All I had was my talent and my education,” says Ghafari. “Nothing else.”

But her daily, high-stakes gamble to show up for work in a violent city so close to the Afghan capital is emblematic of a government in crisis. The Taliban now control or contest nearly half the country, including large sections of Highway 1, and are gaining ground, propelled by a February peace deal with the U.S. In exchange for a vague pledge to reduce hostilities and not harbor terrorist groups like Al Qaeda, the Trump administration committed to a full troop withdrawal by this summer. In the months since, the Taliban have ramped up their of-

fensive. According to a U.S. government watchdog, attacks against Afghan forces and civilians surged by 50 percent in the third quarter of 2020.

In Wardak, Highway 1 – the government’s key lifeline for moving troops and trade – has been under concentrated assault. The hulks of Afghan army Humvees disfigured by roadside bombs litter the hillsides in Maidan Shar, which we finally reach more than an hour after setting off from Kabul. Construction of a new mosque and children’s “fun park” initiated by the mayor are both stalled. Passing a traffic roundabout with a giant billboard of Ghafari, we slip behind 12-foot-high concrete blast walls that entomb the government compound, and the mayor can breathe easy, for a moment.

Ghafari settles into her office and doesn’t even look up from the stack of paperwork she’s signing when the first Taliban rocket of the day thuds in the near distance. She must leave work by 3 p.m. each day to avoid traffic that could strand her on the highway after dark. Moments later there’s another explosion, closer to the compound. “There are Taliban checkpoints just a few miles from my office, but I’m safe here because of the security forces,” she says cheerfully. “They make every woman, every man around this country feel secure.”

For all her bravura, Ghafari is still a politician with an official posture to uphold. The sentiment is far different among civilians living in besieged villages along the highway, trapped between advancing militants and government forces they allege are firing indiscriminately on their homes in a desperate effort to hold the enemy back.

In the hallway outside Ghafari’s office, I’m summoned by a gray-bearded man. He leads me to a group of tribal elders from Durani village waiting for an audience with the mayor. All of them blame government forces for reckless retaliations they say have killed loved ones in recent months.

THE MAYOR

Ghafari has survived multiple assassination attempts. “I’m risking my life,” she says, “every drop of my blood, for my country and my people.”



JIM HUYLEBROEK/NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

JASON MOTLAGH wrote about the toll of U.S. airstrikes on Afghan civilians in the July issue.



“My wife’s body was torn to pieces,” says Mohammad Ajan, a gas seller. “I gathered all the small pieces of her flesh with my hands.”

“My son was shot in the head,” says Mohammad Anwar, one of his neighbors.

“I lost a nephew,” nods Farouq, the man who summoned me.

A soft-spoken shopkeeper named Abdul Baqi, his arm limp in a sling due to a gunshot wound, describes the latest incident. Two days earlier, his cousin’s four children were injured by an SPG-9 rocket allegedly fired by the Afghan army, “the only people who have these kind of heavy weapons,” Ajan interjects. With no decent trauma facilities in Wardak, the children were rushed to the Emergency Hospital in Kabul for surgery. Their mother, who was outside washing clothes, was killed instantly by the strike, Baqi says. “We buried her yesterday.”

Despite these tragedies, the men roundly affirmed their support for the central government even if they’d lost all faith in its ability to defend them. “How can they protect us?” says Anwar. “They can’t even protect themselves.”

DANGEROUS PASSAGE

Taliban IEDs have left craters pockmarking Highway 1 at every mile, snarling traffic and reminding drivers of the threat.

NOW IN ITS 20TH YEAR, the U.S. military’s war in Afghanistan has long faded from global headlines. But when historians appraise the cost of the longest war in American history

and how it all unraveled, they will inevitably talk about roads: the roughly 10,000 miles’ worth of highways and byways that were built, repaved, and repaired over hostile terrain on the far side of the world at an astronomical cost to U.S. taxpayers, at a time when aging infrastructure was falling deeper into disrepair back home.

In 2001, Afghanistan had less than 50 miles of paved roads in the entire country. A 2,000-mile “Ring Road” connecting major cities that was started by the Soviets back in the 1950s had been pulverized by decades of war and neglect. The U.S. government and its NATO partners believed that a new and improved Ring Road system, or Highway 1, would lay the groundwork for a functioning state: easing commerce and troop movements to improve security across 34 provinces while putting war-weary people back to work.

More than a third of the population live within 30 miles of the Kabul-Kandahar stretch, making

it the essential artery. In a state roughly split between a Tajik, Hazara, and Turkic north, and a Pashtun-dominated south that spawned the Taliban, the 300-mile highway would help bind the fractious Afghan nation together.

How far those hopes have plunged. In August, I spent several weeks traveling Highway 1 from Kabul to Maidan Shar and parts of the Sayadabad district, the largest in Wardak province and a staging ground for militant attacks around Kabul. Over the course of hundreds of miles – and in meetings with the Taliban, government forces, and civilians caught in the crossfire – a grim truth emerged: The backbone of the U.S.-led nation-building campaign is hopelessly broken, a life-or-death gauntlet where people drive in fear, commerce is stymied, and state forces are targeted with impunity. What was intended to ease the lives of Afghans and cement the U.S. legacy in Afghanistan is, instead, a story of colossal waste and squandered opportunity.

Nearly 20 years ago, construction of the highway started with optimism and promise. In late 2002, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) hired the Louis Berger

HIGHWAY TO HELL

Group (LBG), a New Jersey-based engineering company, to handle the project; with an end-of-2003 deadline set by the White House, the expected cost was \$300 million. But the highway's path through hard, ambush-ready badlands pushed engineers and hundreds of road workers to the limit, and made them easy targets. In a three-month period in late 2003, a Turkish LBG subcontractor was kidnapped, another was shot, and two Indian road workers were abducted; two American road superintendents survived an attack near Kandahar in which one was shot in the head. A total of 40 people died during Highway 1 construction in 2003, according to Andrew Natsios, a former USAID administrator. "We paid for the highway not just in dollars and cents, but in blood," he writes in a history of the project. "The casualty rates were unprecedented."

The first layer of blacktop was nonetheless completed on schedule, slashing travel time between Kabul and Kandahar from at least 18 hours down to six. At a roadside ceremony in December, Afghan President Hamid Karzai cut a ribbon with gold-plated scissors. "Today is one of the best days of our lives," he declared. "We are rebuilding Afghanistan, bringing back to us what we all desired — like every other people in the civilized world."

By then, however, George W. Bush's administration was preoccupied with the war in Iraq. Seasoned officers and essential resources were diverted at a pivotal moment in the conflict.

"There was a huge sucking sound as all the military talent left Afghanistan," says a senior U.S. officer who was redeployed to Iraq. With the Taliban out of the way, there was an "opportunity to move quickly in terms of getting the Afghan government up and running in the countryside," says Richard Boucher, a former assistant secretary of state, who formulated U.S. policy for Afghanistan from 2006 to 2009. "We failed to do that in part because we focused on Iraq and in part because we had this idea that we could do all of it."

In this security vacuum, the resurgent Taliban laid siege to the highway. Attacks on LBG road crews intensified — fueled in part, Afghan officials told me, by grievances over the company's failure to hire local workers and consult tribal elders. In February 2004, militants shot down an LBG helicopter, killing the pilot and injuring three employees. Meanwhile, travelers were increasingly stopped at gunpoint and shaken down. State employees were often summarily executed on the roadside. The Taliban made a special effort to destroy fuel and supply trucks that serviced the main NATO military bases at Bagram and Kandahar. In one infamous 2008 attack in Ghazni province, a convoy of more than 40 trucks was blown up and left to burn. "The

ON THE FRONT LINE

Scenes from an Afghan police checkpoint: [TOP] Officers fire blindly with a machine gun they purchased themselves. "[The government] gives us nothing," one says. [RIGHT] The officers monitor Taliban chatter on radio during the day. At night the Taliban descend from hills to attack. [BOTTOM] An officer tries to get some rest. Just the night before a nearby outpost had been overrun. "We are like prisoners here — we must guard our positions until dawn," says their captain.





highway was a vehicle graveyard,” says the senior U.S. officer, who returned to Afghanistan after serving in Iraq. “We tried to send logistics guys to move all the carcasses of the dead trucks off the road as fast as possible,” but with all the fighting, “they’d sit there for months on end.”

After President Obama’s election in 2008, the spiraling Afghan war swung back into view. A troop surge that would ultimately climb to a peak of more than 100,000 U.S. service members was accompanied by an infusion of billions in funding to boost Afghan security forces. A series of Afghan National Army bases were erected along Highway 1, and motorcycle police units were created to patrol it. Taking a page out of the Iraqi insurgents’ playbook, the Taliban’s use of roadside bombs jumped 100 percent from 2008 to 2009 to become the main killer of U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

“They were destroying the roads, always attacking,” recalls Mohammad Halim Fidai, Wardak’s governor from 2008 to 2012. “What

NO SECURITY

The gates of the checkpoint outside Maidan Shar, capital of Wardak province. The men say attacks have increased since last February, when the U.S. signed an agreement to withdraw from the country.

is the sin of the road – the road is for everyone!” When he took office, militants were setting up checkpoints on Highway 1 just 500 meters from his compound in Maidan Shar. As thousands more U.S. troops surged into the country, Fidai says, the government was able to extend its influence

and enlist local men to guard and maintain roads and rebuild district centers.

Progress was fleeting. Under Obama, USAID cut funding for road construction. It also refused to fund Afghan government maintenance work, having soured on its ability to complete basic tasks. “The lack of continuity of these programs started losing the trust of the people,” says Fidai. “When you don’t support these people, they go back to the Taliban because they become jobless.” In 2012, there were more than 200 bomb attacks and 300-plus shooting incidents on Highway 1, about one for every mile of asphalt between Kabul and Kandahar. What was once hailed as the “road to Afghanistan’s future” had a new nickname: the “highway of death.”



ODAY THE TALIBAN threat is at the edge of Maidan Shar. Less than two miles south of the governor’s compound, police outpost “Black Rock” is the city’s first line of defense: an overlook of concrete walls and sandbags at the mouth of Highway 1. “If the Taliban capture this post, it means they have captured the whole province of Wardak,” says Capt. Sardarwali Stanikzai, Black Rock’s commanding officer. With just 20 men armed with nothing more than Kalashnikovs and a few box-fed PK machine guns, he says his team is being picked off by American-made sniper rifles and night-vision scopes the Taliban have captured. “It would be better if the Americans were still here,” he says. “We are just like blind men fighting. We can’t see them, but they can see us.”

Stanikzai took command of the outpost after his father, a veteran police commander, was assassinated in a Taliban ambush. He says he’s lost four men since he arrived in 2019. The last was three weeks earlier, when a sniper’s bullet struck

HIGHWAY TO HELL

his deputy in the head; a pile of rocks marks the spot where he fell. The inner walls of the officers' bunker are pocked with head-height bullet holes. "We try to steal a few hours of sleep in the daytime when we can, and we stay up all night on guard," says the captain.

I follow him out to a lookout point with a panoramic view, at once pastoral and menacing. To our rear, a military-intelligence building sits pancaked from a 2019 car bombing that left more than 40 officers dead. Out front, a verdant river valley of orchards ringed by poplar trees sprawls out to the mountains. "The Taliban control all of this," says Stanikzai, sweeping his arm. "They shoot at us from down there," he adds, pointing to a pair of men out strolling a field, farmers most likely. I ask if he's afraid of being overrun. "Of course!" he says. "We worry about that day and night."

Indeed, soon after we head back to Kabul, some of his men are ambushed returning from the city center on the short, exposed section of highway between the outpost and the governor's compound. The attack started when a roadside bomb detonated in a canal we had driven over twice that day. No one was killed, but the gun battle raged for most of an hour.

With the Taliban expanding their grip in the backcountry, the need to protect road crews under steady attack around the Ring Road drove U.S. military and CIA officers to spend more and more funds on unsavory partnerships in recent years. Warlords, government officials, religious figures, and other shady power brokers – everyone got paid in a flailing effort to bring stability. "We had partnerships with all the wrong players," a senior U.S. diplomat told government interviewers, according to "the Afghanistan Papers," a more than 2,000-page trove of documents published in *The Washington Post* that showed the mismanagement and futility of the war effort. "It's a case of security trumping everything else," said Douglas Lute, an Army lieutenant general who served as the White House's Afghan war czar from 2007 to 2013, telling interviewers that the U.S. dumped huge amounts of money into building dams and highways just "to show we could spend it."

A forensic accountant who served on a military task force in Afghanistan from 2010 to 2012 and helped assess some 3,000 Defense Department contracts worth \$106 billion concluded that about 40 percent of the money ended up in the hands of Taliban insurgents, criminal groups, or crooked Afghan officials. U.S. officials were "so desperate to have the alcoholics to the table," an unnamed State Department official said, that "we kept pouring drinks, not knowing [or] considering we were killing them."

NEVER-ENDING WAR

Soldiers from the Afghan National Army head out on Highway 1 to fight the Taliban after a base near Kabul comes under intense fire. After 20 years of war, the Taliban are in their strongest position since losing control of the country in the wake of 9/11. Douglas Lute, an Army lieutenant general who served as the White House's Afghan war czar from 2007 to 2013, said that the U.S. dumped huge amounts of money into massive building projects like Highway 1 "to show we could spend it."







The Afghan sinkhole reached a staggering low with the Gardez-Khost highway, a 60-mile stretch linking the Ring Road to the eastern borderlands. The contract was turned over to LBG, and construction started in 2003. In November 2010, the federal government slapped LBG with the highest ever fine in a wartime contracting case: \$18.7 million in criminal penalties and \$50.6 million in civil penalties for overbilling. The company's former CEO had pleaded guilty in 2014 to defrauding U.S. taxpayers of tens of millions. But the project dragged on, unchecked. By the time the road opened, in 2015, costs had ballooned to nearly \$5 million a mile, and it became a never-ending boondoggle. A whistleblower later revealed that LBG had, through dubious methods, paid insurgents not to attack the project. More than 200 gold-star families have since filed a lawsuit against LBG and other defense contractors, alleging these kinds of protection payments "aided and abetted terrorism by directly funding an al-Qaeda-backed Taliban insurgency that killed and injured thousands of Americans." (The case is still in court.)

In 2016, the special inspector general for Afghanistan (SIGAR), the government watchdog agency that provides quarterly audits to Congress, published a report on the dismal state of Afghanistan's roads. Some 95 percent of the Highway 1 sections it inspected were either damaged or destroyed; the Kabul-Kandahar section was "beyond repair" and needed "to be rebuilt," the report noted, warning that "if the road becomes impassable, the central government will collapse."

It's hard to fathom a lower return on investment. According to an October 2020 audit report, the U.S. has spent nearly \$134 billion overall on Afghan reconstruction since 2001 — far more than it did rebuilding 16 European countries after World War II. Of the \$63 billion reviewed by SIGAR, about 30 percent, or some \$19 billion, was "lost to waste, fraud, and abuse."

In hindsight, some former U.S. officials say that instead of flooding the country with reconstruction aid and contractors, a greater effort

AMONG THE TALIBAN

Street life in the Taliban-controlled village of Qala Amir, Tangi Valley. U.S. troops fought hard to purge the Taliban from the area. Now all that remains for their efforts are abandoned bases. "The U.S. did nothing for us," says a shopkeeper, "other than build this road."

should have been made to build up the capacity of Afghan institutions and secure more buy-in from the public. "Afghanistan never had a government that was capable of serving the people," says Boucher. "It didn't matter how much we spent: Unless we built the capabilities of the Afghan government to deliver benefits to the people, we weren't gonna get stability out of it. We were spending money through a broken vessel."

B

BEYOND THE BLAST WALLS OF Stanikzai's outpost, Highway 1 carves its way through the hardscrabble farming villages, plains, and mountains of what is now undisputed Taliban country. Two

hundred meters down the road, the first bomb crater blisters the pavement; we count 19 in a single 30-mile stretch. In some places we are forced to slalom between yawning pits that



could swallow our car. At least there's no traffic to contend with.

Photographer Andrew Quilty, filmmaker Mark Oltmanns, and I are squeezed in the back of a beat up Corolla, wearing traditional dress; our translator, Ahmad, sits in front. All of us are on the lookout for Taliban checkpoints that are known to appear out of nowhere and wary of the unexploded bombs that seed the highway. We're driving to the Afghan army command about 25 miles south of Maidan Shar. The army outposts that crop up every few miles are a jumble of razor wire and Hesco barriers. Some are abandoned. The odd Afghan flag signals where troops are still hunkered down, though no one is visible.

An hour later we pull into a large base that's built like a maze, spiraling inward to the headquarters, where the commander of the Afghan Army's 5th Brigade in Wardak, Col. Hamidullah Kohdamani, is surprised – and a little troubled – to see us. Calling on traditional Afghan hospitality, we've given him no choice but to host us for the night.

“Since earlier this year, the enemy has stepped up their attacks,” the colonel explains, “so they can say, ‘We are powerful, we can make this situation worse for you.’” Drawing a line in the dirt with his boot, he shows me where his troops are massed along the highway, near a notorious insurgent stronghold that U.S. and Afghan forces had both long forsaken to the Taliban. From this base, he says, militants are launching bolder, more frequent attacks on the highway and Kabul. The colonel insists he has a plan to retake the valley when the weather cools down. “The Taliban are afraid of us – they are fighting like thieves,” he adds, with a nervous smile that betrays a lack of conviction.

A radio crackles. There are reports of enemy movement in a wooded area to the south, where the Taliban build roadside bombs, or IEDs, and the colonel gives the order for an artillery strike. I tell him about the villagers I've met who allege their relatives were killed by errant shells. How can he be sure no civilians are in harm's way?

“No, no – it's not a civilian area!” he says, assuring me intelligence is coming from assets on

the ground. “We are constantly firing in that area, and, as I have witnessed, no civilians have ever been harmed; we are making maximum effort not to harm civilians.” Suddenly, though, Kohdamani seems unsure. Without explanation, he instructs his gunner to shift the barrel 90 degrees to a bald ridge on the far side of the highway. No threat is imminent; we're only told the base takes occasional rocket fire from that direction. The shell smashes into the mountain – a completely arbitrary show of force that, hopefully, has done nothing more than break the midday quiet.

CHILDREN OF WAR

[TOP] A father shows his son's prosthetic leg, the result, he says, of a U.S. airstrike.

[BOTTOM] Local Taliban commander Tawakul, with his bodyguards. “The Taliban control the Kabul-Kandahar highway,” he says. “The Americans did their best, but this was what the so-called superpower was able to accomplish.”

us. (Most of the remainder occurred in crossfire or were caused by ISIS or undetermined elements. U.S.-led forces were responsible for two percent.)

The colonel disappears for the night, and a promised patrol along the highway never materializes. A lanky sergeant named Waheed Jan informs us that the district center 35 miles away is under attack and two soldiers are critically injured from a mine blast. That evening, I listen in as a radio operator tries in vain to summon a medevac from Kabul; 10 hours after they were hit, one of the men dies from excessive blood loss, and the other is still waiting for a chopper. Meanwhile, a vehicle convoy dispatched to provide support is stuck on the highway battling a Taliban ambush. “The truth is we're taking a lot of casualties here, and our [command] does not share it with the media,” says Jan. He later confides that he, too, was recovering from an IED blast on the highway.

Under the circumstances, the sergeant says it could take several days to arrange an Afghan army convoy back to Kabul. Given the high likelihood of being blown up in their company, we take our chances in the morning and drive back on our own, falling silent over gravel patches and irrigation canals where bombs are easily placed. The only trouble we encounter is from the Afghan army command, which detains us for questioning at their base in Maidan Shar.

“You did not receive permission – you broke the rules,” barks a gruff military intelligence officer who drove down from Kabul to check us out. Eventually we are allowed to leave, with a stern warning from the security forces not to defy the rules again. We had clearly glimpsed the underbelly of a losing war that the Afghan government didn't want us to see. [Cont. on 81]

THE NEW FACE OF URBAN POP

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Reviews

Music

THE FOO FIGHTERS' POP PARTY

The alt-rock standard-bearers' 10th album is the most upbeat music they've ever made

By KORY GROW



Foo Fighters

Medicine at Midnight

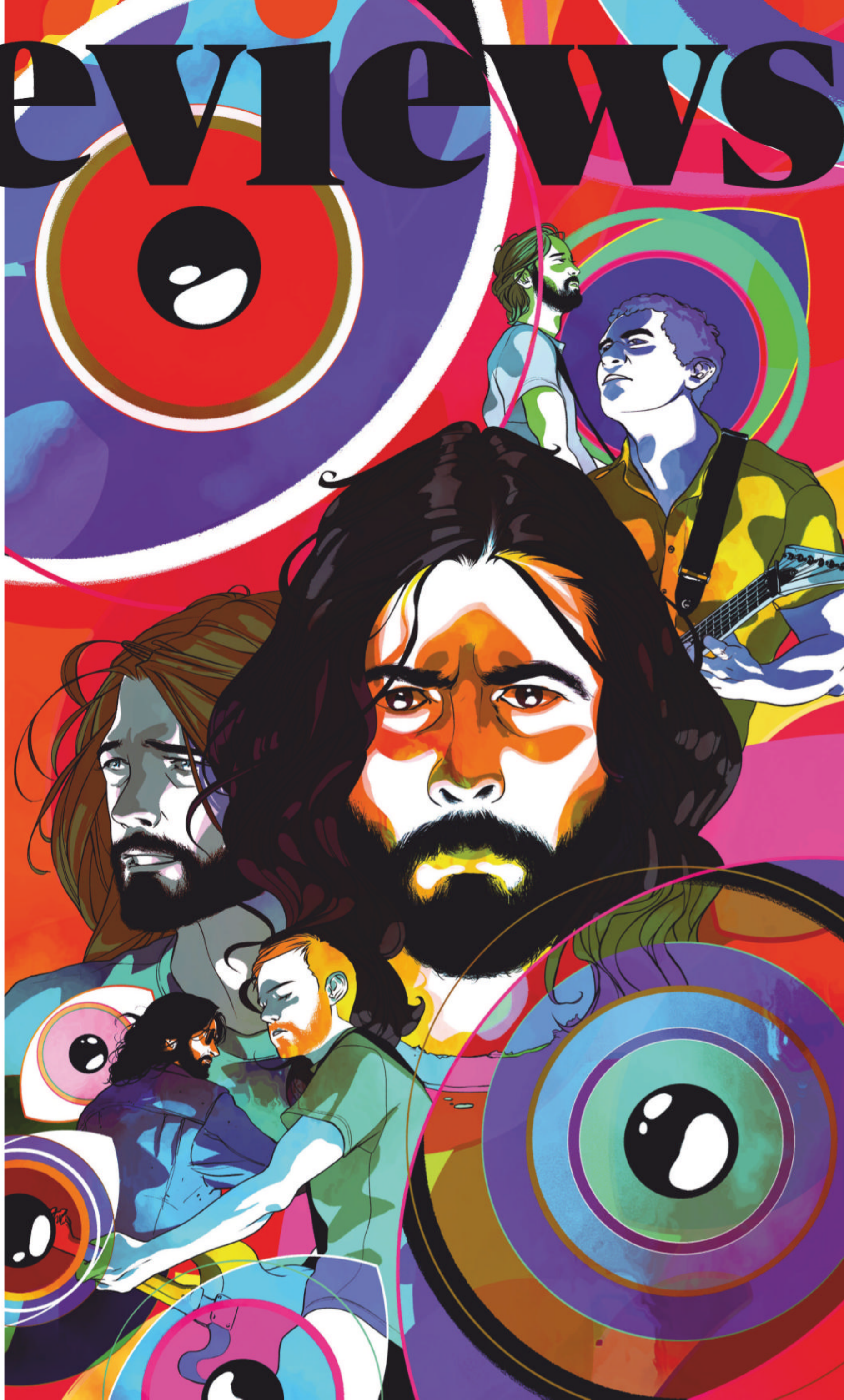
RCA

★★★★☆

FOO FIGHTERS have been a reliable alt-rock institution for more than 25 years. A band with that kind of august track record could get bored or complacent with their job. But Dave Grohl and Co. just keep happily chugging along, putting out solid-to-great records, satisfying their enormous fan base with killer stadium shows, and keeping things fresh for themselves by coming up with interesting concepts (like their 2014 HBO doc series/album *Sonic Highways*) and tossed-off collaborations with pals like Justin Timberlake, Rick Astley, or Serj Tankian.

The Foos' 10th album is upbeat even by their uniquely well-adjusted standards, returning to their core →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Goñi Montes



➔ FOO FIGHTERS

Nineties alt-rock sound minus any gimmicks, detours, or shenanigans.

From the first track, “Making a Fire,” the album is brighter and more optimistic than anything they’ve ever done. As Grohl commands a slippery guitar riff that ascends toward the heavens, a choir of women sings a sunny “na-na-na” refrain, leading to a foot-stomping, hand-clapping gospel breakdown and his latest lyrical confession, “I’ve waited a lifetime to live.” Then there are even more na-na-na’s, which, incidentally, aren’t by a choir at all, but the LP’s most notable guest, Dave’s teenage daughter, Violet, who recorded her own harmonies. Whether it’s a sense of paternal pride or sheer determination, Grohl sounds reinvigorated here, and that enthusiasm is the group’s guiding light on the record.

Although Grohl has spent much of his post-Nirvana career emulating his Seventies FM-radio rock idols, *Medicine at Midnight* evidences a pop streak that he’s only hinted at before. As with their last album, 2017’s *Concrete and Gold*, Foo Fighters teamed up with Adele and Kelly Clarkson producer Greg Kurstin, who has helped them hone their tuneful sensibilities. On the title track, they mix funky disco loops and acoustic guitar without losing their edge, and the serene ballad “Chasing Birds” has a melody that lingers well after its final chord.

Even the harder-rocking songs overflow with ear candy. The band tries its hand at some “Low Rider” cowbell on “Cloudspotter,” dabbles with video-game laser sounds and gospel vocals on the punky anti-war banger “No Son of Mine,” and attempts a Freddie Mercury-like vocal echo and quirky rhythms on “Holding Poison.” When Grohl swears “There’s got to be more to this... because I need more,” on the slow-building “Waiting on a War,” the record’s best rocker, it sounds like an arena singalong waiting to happen.

The band finished *Medicine* before the Covid-19 pandemic, which may account for its upbeat mood. Only the album’s relatively mopey lead single, “Shame Shame,” feels out of place, and there’s more than enough good times to make up for it – just check the LP-ending ode to joy, “Love Dies Young.” It’s one of many reminders here that concepts and gimmicks have their place, but Grohl is at his best when he cuts loose and rocks out. **R**

ZAYN FINDS HIS SWEET SPOT

The former One Direction member delivers a hopeful LP of bedroom R&B By BRITTANY SPANOS

ZAYN MALIK kicks off his third solo album wondering, as its title indicates, if anybody is listening to him. And as you might guess, he’s pretty sure nobody is: “My brain lives with the cannabis/Can I resist the dark abyss?” he offers on “Calamity,” a silly



Zayn
Nobody Is Listening
RCA
★★★★☆



spoken-word poem in which the ex-One Direction member turned solo hitmaker sounds like a teenage stoner.

Malik has a point. It’s been more than two years since his last album, *Icarus Falls*, an aptly titled 27-track follow-up to his much sleeker 2016 debut, *Mind of Mine*. Both LPs left listeners with more

questions than answers about what Malik wanted out of his post-1D career: chart-topping success or the kind of musical honesty that can lead to 27-song records named after figures from Greek mythology?

Despite its brooding introduction, *Nobody Is Listening* shows both restraint and growth from a new dad who

just turned 28, even if the songs seem more reflective of his relationship with longtime partner Gigi Hadid than of his journey into fatherhood. Given Malik’s R&B-crooner ambitions, it’s a good thing he can sing the hell out of a love song.

The smooth lead single, “Better,” is a sweet, intimate portrait of second chances that sets the tone for the coffee-shop-guitar sound of the LP. “Outside” sees him tenderly begging for forgiveness, while the falsetto-laden “Connexion” is Malik confirming that he’s ready to “go head first into the unknown.” Featuring chill vocals from neo-soul singer Syd, the breezy “When Loves Around” has Malik hinting at the possibility of marriage while showing off how well he works with the right duet partner.

There are still some moments of irrepressibly horny R&B, recalling *Mind of Mine*. “Windowsill” is both the dirtiest and catchiest song on the album – much better than the diluted “Sweat,” though that song’s “In the Air Tonight” drum fill right before the chorus gives it some much-needed energy.

The record reaches its peak with the one-two punch of “Tightrope” and “River Road,” delicate closing statements and two of Malik’s best songs to date. The former is an inspired love song that finds power in its simplicity, with the singer drawing meaning out of the repeated phrase “Something told me it was you.” “River Road” encroaches on Leon Bridges’ retro-soul territory, as Malik sings hopefully about his future, delivering the most sobering vocal performance on a largely subdued, bedroom-y project. If he really thinks nobody is listening, that’s fine by him; there’s only one person he has in mind anyway, and there’s nothing more honest in pop music than that. **R**



BREAKING

Arlo Parks’ Gen Z Folk-Soul Redemption

THIS 20-YEAR-OLD singer-songwriter from London is getting “voice of a generation” hype in the U.K., and there’s no doubting the allure of her music, which is equally influenced by Elliott Smith and Frank Ocean. Arlo Parks sings subtly and feels deeply on her debut, *Collapsed Into Sunbeams*, which takes its title from a line in a Zadie Smith novel, spinning tales of Gen Z emotional malaise over tracks that land between R&B, indie pop, and folk.

The highlight is “Caroline,” a delicate evocation of watching a couple fight on the street that gets inside other people’s pain with the empathetic literary beauty of classic Ray Davies. **JON DOLAN**

Quick Hits

Ten new albums you need to know about now

The Weather Station

Ignorance

Fat Possum



HEAVY WEATHER The fifth album from this rootsy Canadian collective is a revelatory collection of glassy-piano dance grooves and noir folk, based in Tamara Lindeman's piercing songwriting.



Sarah Mary Chadwick

Me and Ennui Are Friends, Baby

Rice Is Nice



DARK POWER Like a sullen love child of PJ Harvey and Daniel Johnston, the New Zealand singer spills her guts about heartbreak and loss on 12 brilliant, at times shocking, stream-of-consciousness ballads.



John Carpenter

Lost Themes III: Alive After Death

Sacred Bones



SPOOKY SYNTHS Carpenter directed and composed eerie soundtracks for films like *Halloween* and *Escape From New York*. His latest set of atmospheric synth music will have you looking over your shoulder too.



Rhye

Home

Rough Trade



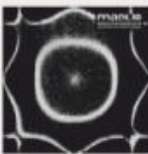
LAID-BACK KICKS Mike Milosh's third album is a chill art-disco outing inspired by the multi-instrumentalist's safe space and new relationship; his whispery falsetto and meditative grooves will draw you in.



Madlib

Sound Ancestors

Invazion



BEATHEAD HEAVEN Any producer who can build a funky track from a sample of mumbly post-punks the Young Marble Giants is on his own level, and that's par for the course for this crate-digging wizard.



Steve Earle and the Dukes

J.T.

New West



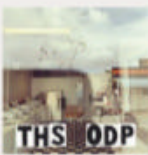
RIP J.T. Steve Earle honors his late son, Justin Townes Earle, with 10 covers of Justin's songs. The mood is more celebratory than maudlin, but the father in mourning also floors you with his grief.



The Hold Steady

Open Door Policy

Positive Jams



STEADY AND STRONG This late in the game, Craig Finn should have run out of punk-rock-noir narratives, but, nope, the lyrics on the eighth THS album are as vivid as ever, and the guitars ring true.



Morgan Wallen

Dangerous: The Double Album

Big Loud



TIKTOK TWANG This 30-song offering from the TikTok country phenom is more playlist than album, with enough three-minute doses of hometown humility and whiskey worship to supply country radio for eons.



Florida Georgia Line

Life Rolls On

BMLG



PARTY'S OVER The bro-country trailblazers are now more comfortable in church pews than at tailgates. But if their pious devotionals work ("Good to Me"), their beer o'clock callbacks feel forced.



Barry Gibb

Greenfields: The Gibb Brothers Songbook, Vol. 1

Capitol



BURIED GIBB Pairing the last surviving Bee Gee with Nashville artists to remake the Gibb brothers' classic songs as rootsy country is a misfire that will only make you miss the brothers' harmonies even more.



UPDATE

NEW SCHOOL OLD SCHOOL POST-PUNK

Two great U.K. bands show the possibilities of vintage noise

THE SECOND LP from London's Shame is a thrilling kick in the teeth. They recall the jagged repetition of the Fall and the prole-thrash zeal of Stiff Little Fingers on guitar-howl screeds like "Snow Day," in which walking through the city in bad weather makes for a grueling journey inward. *Drunk Tank Pink* really takes off when the assault gives way



Shame

Drunk Tank Pink

★★★★☆



Goat Girl

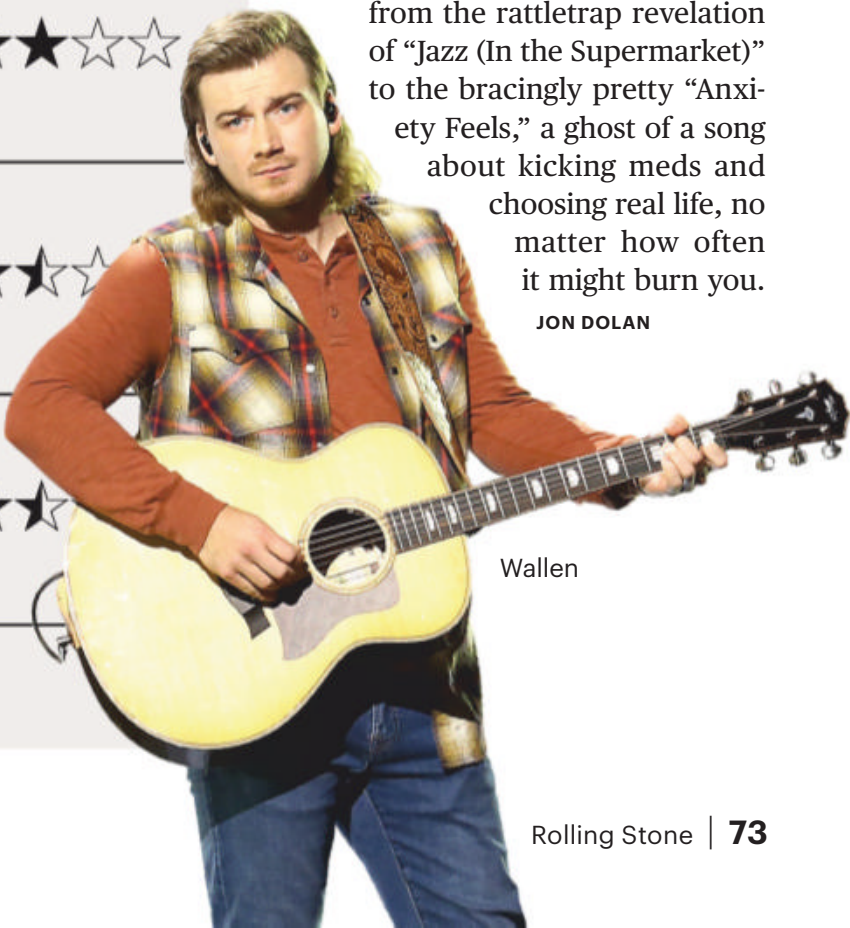
On All Fours

★★★★☆

to a groove, à la art-funk gods ESG or Liquid Liquid.

Goat Girl's second album evokes the dreamier side of post-punk – bands like the Raincoats and Oh-OK. Listening to *On All Fours* is like wandering in a cool thrift shop, from the rattletrap revelation of "Jazz (In the Supermarket)" to the bracingly pretty "Anxiety Feels," a ghost of a song about kicking meds and choosing real life, no matter how often it might burn you.

JON DOLAN



Wallen

CONTRIBUTORS: JONATHAN BERNSTEIN, DAVID BROWNE, JON DOLAN, KORY GROW, JOSEPH HUDAK, ANGIE MARTOCCIO

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: JASON KEMPIN/ACMA2020/GETTY IMAGES; RYNE HELLESTAD/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES; RICK KERN/WIREIMAGE; MEDIOS Y MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES; SIMON KARIS; TERRY WYATT/GETTY IMAGES

ESSAY

How Superhero TV Took Flight

Comic-book series once seemed self-consciously nerdy, but today caped crusaders dominate the small screen

By ALAN SEPINWALL

NO TIGHTS, NO FLIGHTS.” This was the mantra of the creative team behind *Smallville*, this century’s first significant TV show based on a comic book. The tale of a teenage Clark Kent (Tom Welling) still living on the family farm in Kansas, the series was made under the belief that it would have to end the moment he became Superman. But there was also a sense at the time that superheroes had fallen so far out of the mainstream that a cape, flying, or even using the word “superpowers” (Clark liked to talk about his “abilities”) might scare off potential viewers who found all the four-color trappings a bit too weird or geeky.

Twenty years after *Smallville* debuted, the geeks have inherited the Earth, and the world of comic-book television has room for plenty of men and women in tights, some of them flying, some with esoteric mental powers, some with actual functioning gills. Buoyed by an explosion in TV outlets, plus radical shifts in what digital effects can create and viewers will accept, superhero series are everywhere, with a wide variety of shapes, sizes, and powers. In late 2019, Welling even played Clark Kent again in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, a sprawling TV-crossover event featuring dozens of costumed DC heroes from shows and films past and present. (Welling was one of three different Supermen involved, in fact, alongside *Superman Returns* star Brandon Routh and Tyler Hoechlin from the CW’s new *Superman & Lois* series.) *Crisis*’ vast array of characters, code names, powers, and technobabble about parallel universes simply



wouldn’t have been possible in the early days of *Smallville*, either from a budget standpoint or producer confidence in what audiences would follow.

Crisis hasn’t even been the strangest super-trip television’s gone on in the past few years. *Homelander* (Antony Starr), the Superman stand-in from Amazon’s acidic superhero satire *The Boys*, has a lactation fetish. On HBO Max’s ode to superpowered oddness, *Doom Patrol*, Robotman – the brain of a dimwitted NASCAR driver (Brendan Fraser) encased in an old-timey metal body – got into a fight with his imaginary friend, Jesus Christ. And on Disney+’s new *WandaVision*, Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen) and the Vision (Paul Bettany)

SUPER IS AS SUPER DOES Starr, as Homelander, leads heroes from *The Boys*, *Arrow*, *Watchmen*, *Luke Cage*, *WandaVision*, *The Umbrella Academy*, and *Doom Patrol* (clockwise from top).

from the *Avengers* films appear to be living in classic sitcom homes like the ones in *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and *Bewitched*.

It’s been a fascinating evolution that’s both paralleled the rise of superhero films and run counter to them. And in television’s early days, the notion of something like *The Boys* or *Crisis* airing on the small screen would have seemed as fanciful as a man leaping tall buildings in a single bound.

There was a Superman on TV back then, played in stark black and white by George Reeves, aided by primitive special effects and bad guys who threw their empty pistols at him after their bullets bounced off his broad chest. But for a long time, the medium’s defining

costumed hero was Batman. As played with precision comic timing and unmistakable self-awareness by Adam West in ABC's campy mid-Sixties series, *Batman* was a white-hot phenomenon that briefly dominated all of pop culture (Andy Warhol and Nico even dressed up as Burt Ward and West for a photo shoot) and cast a long shadow over the next several decades of comic-book adaptations. The Seventies *Wonder Woman* series with Lynda Carter was played a bit straighter, for instance, but still with a tone acknowledging that this was all silly, whereas a few years later Bill Bixby and Lou Ferrigno's *The Incredible Hulk* opted to keep things serious and relatively low-fi. Even attempts to try something different with the genre – CBS' earnest, short-lived *The Flash* or ABC's superpowered rom-com *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, both relics of the Nineties – were hamstrung by what they could financially afford to show their heroes doing.

Eventually, the genre just fell out of fashion, even as shows without comic-book roots proved there was a growing appetite for comic-book trappings. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was a traditional superhero show in everything but its point of origin and its heroine's lack of costume. (*Smallville* was created in part to give the WB another *Buffy*-esque show.) NBC's *Heroes* briefly found huge success trying to pass off classic comic tropes as something it had invented wholesale. But with its pseudo-scientific dialogue and pretentious narration, it seemed to be trying to distance itself from its inspiration – another superhero show apologizing for being a superhero show.

In 2012, the CW premiered *Arrow*, starring Stephen Amell as Oliver Queen, a.k.a. the heroic archer Green Arrow, who had been appearing in DC Comics since 1941. A transparent attempt to do a Batman show without Batman himself, *Arrow* nonetheless felt the need to hold viewers' hands at first. Oliver had no powers, and even a code name was out at the beginning, with people referring to him as "the vigilante" or "the Hood." (No one regularly called him Green Arrow until the fourth season.) In this case, though, it was immersion therapy. *Arrow* soon introduced Grant Gustin as speedster hero the Flash, eventually to headline his own spinoff that was followed by other DC-inspired series about Supergirl, Black Lightning, Batwoman, and a motley group of heroes known as the Legends of Tomorrow. As the number of shows in what came to be called "the Arrow-verse" expanded, so did a sense of what was possible on television – not just what could be accomplished technically, but what audiences would follow without hesitation. These series layered one nerd-approved concept (psychic gorilla villains, constant rewriting of the timeline, heroes created by merging two men into one) on top of another – until suddenly a crazy event like *Crisis* would seem perfectly natural.

The Arrow-verse shows were also helped by the exploding popularity of the Marvel Cinematic Universe films, which were mainstreaming concepts that network executives might

have once dismissed as too niche. Superhero shows haven't had the commercial success of their movie counterparts, but public embrace of quirky heroes like Groot, Doctor Strange, and Ant-Man made it easier in turn for a show like *Legends of Tomorrow* to let its freak flag fly.

DC insisted on keeping its movie and television universes separate, while Marvel shows like *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and *Daredevil* were stymied by a one-way relationship with the MCU. Eventually, the entire Marvel TV team was replaced by producers and stars from the film side: not just on *WandaVision*, but also on upcoming series focusing on Falcon, the Winter Soldier, Loki, and Hawkeye.

Those new shows will all be part of Disney+, and the explosion in streaming content has been particularly good for both the abundance and variety of comic-book TV. The defunct DC Universe service (most of it now on HBO Max) needed content that would feel different from the CW shows, which led not only to the eccentric wildness of *Doom Patrol* (whose outcast heroes include a genderqueer city street named Danny) but also to an unintentionally amusing *Titans* show, whose grim and gritty Robin (Brenton Thwaites) declares "Fuck Batman" in the first episode.

Even more anti-establishment, and with pastiches of iconic heroes rather than the actual thing, is *The Boys*, which savages the ubiquity of comic-book adaptations while suggesting superpowers would fundamentally corrupt anyone who got them. (In the second season, a Nazi seduces and then recruits Homelander to her side.) And after a failed Marvel partnership, Netflix turned elsewhere for supers, adapting indie comic *The Umbrella Academy*, which has narrative bumps but periodically hints that the next logical step for this kind of story is to do it as a musical.

Experimentation has been possible even with properties from the major comics publishers. FX's *Legion*, about the mentally ill son (Dan Stevens) of Professor X, felt more indebted to psychedelia and French New Wave films than it did to any *X-Men* movie; it eventually lost the plot, but its style put most of its peers to shame. And one of the very best TV shows of the past several years – no "comic book" or "superhero" qualifier required – was Damon Lindelof's racially conscious reimagining of the groundbreaking Eighties comic *Watchmen*, for HBO. More interested in being faithful to the spirit of the comic than the plot, *Watchmen* dazzled and disturbed in equal measure, while its portrait of police officers dressed up as costumed vigilantes – and being secretly manipulated by white supremacists – turned out to be startlingly prescient about today's America.

There will surely come a time, maybe very soon, when the conglomerates that own all this intellectual property (DC and Marvel are run, respectively, by Warner Bros. and Disney) will put the clamps on anything that doesn't show absolute reverence and fealty to the most iconic versions of each character. But in this particular moment, "no tights, no flights" has briefly become "no limits." 🦋



MEN NOT IN TIGHTS

Three hit comic-book adaptations with no costumes in sight

The Walking Dead (AMC)

The long-running horror comic about a post-apocalyptic America overrun by zombies became one of the most watched shows of the 2010s.

Riverdale (CW)

Archie, Jughead, Betty, Veronica, and the rest of the gang got a very modern, noir update, courtesy of playwright-turned-comics-writer Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa.

The End of the F***ing World (Netflix)

A troubled boy incapable of emotion and a girl who feels everything way too much go on an endearing and fraught road trip.

THE FIVE BEST SUPERHERO SHOWS EVER

1. Watchmen HBO, 2019



Damon Lindelof's take on the iconic Eighties deconstruction of superheroes had masked cops battling white supremacists, time travel, murdered clones, and all kinds of wild ideas that had no business fitting together, but did. By not copying the story of the original *Watchmen*, Lindelof re-created its magic.

2. Batman ABC, 1966-68



The camp classic was briefly a mod sensation, then spent decades viewed as a joke fans were eager to erase from existence. Eventually, it was reappraised for the joy that it was rather than the dour slog so many modern Bat stories had become. Who do you want saving your life: a gruff ball of angst, or a hero who'll dance the Batusi with you?

3. Daredevil Netflix, 2015-18



Jessica Jones' psychologically taut first season was the high point of the uneven run of Netflix Marvel shows, but *Daredevil* was more consistently good thanks to memorable villains like Vincent D'Onofrio's Kingpin and some of the most impressively choreographed fight scenes ever put on TV.

4. Legends of Tomorrow

CW, 2016-present



The DC Comics shows are best when they remember to be fun, not angsty. Even after a forgettable debut season, no other *Arrow* spinoffs have been nearly as light or charming as this tale of heroes traveling through time to fix their mistakes.

5. The Middleman

ABC Family, 2008



An unjustly forgotten but delightful show about a woman who joins a secret agency tasked with protecting the world from aliens, intelligent apes who quote the *Godfather* films, and... a cursed tuba from the *Titanic*? Imagine the happiest parts of *Batman '66*, *Buffy*, and *The Tick* thrown into a blender. Put it on Disney+ already! **A.S.**



McDormand looks to the horizon for answers.

Movies

THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD

Frances McDormand falls in with a community of middle-aged migrants in director Chloé Zhao's quietly moving drama



K. AUSTIN COLLINS

IMAGINE A place on the map so tied to its industries that when the work disappears, so does the place. A ZIP code can be, as Chloé Zhao's new film *Nomadland* puts it in an opening title card, "discontinued": "On January 31, 2011, due to a reduced demand for sheetrock, U.S. Gypsum shut down its plant in Empire, Nevada, after 88 years." What happens to the town's residents? If you need work to live, and if home is meant

to be an anchor, who are you without either?

It's precisely this set of presumptions, with their attitude of liberal concern, that *Nomadland* deftly and unexpectedly peels apart. Like Zhao's breakthrough 2017 movie, *The Rider*, the cast is stacked with nonprofessionals, and for readers of Jessica Bruder's 2017 nonfiction book of the same name, some of the characters we meet will be familiar. There's Linda May as the still-upbeat Linda, Charlene Swankie as Swankie, and playing a man named Bob, the sixtysomething internet personality Bob Wells, whose video dispatches on his YouTube channel (CheapRVLiving) have become a

dedicated resource for people who similarly live as self-declared nomads.

Among them looms a veritable movie star. Frances McDormand plays Fern, a widower from Empire and a relative newcomer to the nomadic life. Her van – her home – is named Vanguard. And for the people in the life she once lived, there's an assumption of misery to Fern's fate. "I'm not home-

less," she says to a young woman she once mentored, in a clarifying tone. "I'm just...houseless. Not the same thing, right?"

You expect a movie that pivots on that difference to have a winking awareness. *Nomadland*, though far from joyless, is not a playful film. Fern is, in McDormand's dependably humane and capable depiction, full of life, memories, and desires that confront her needs. But the poles pulling her to and fro are not purely emotional; like everyone, she moves with the work, packs up when it dries up, commits herself to the long haul of this life. You never sense outright regret, which is key.

But the movie also avoids reducing her to the plot device that a

movie star, doing her best to fit in among a mobile working class, could easily become. McDormand has always seemed like the rare Oscar winner who'd be at home in most of our living rooms, rather than distractingly glamorous or magnetic. It works here. She is most certainly what pulls us through the story, a conceit made most explicit when the camera, tracking her from behind, wanders as she wanders. Zhao goes out of her way to anchor Fern in the felt reality of these places. (While filming in the fall of 2018, the writer-director lived out of a van along with the rest of the crew.)

It's a tenuous cycle, a tenuous life. This is a film full of transitions: The comings and goings of migratory work seasons give it a structural backbone. The friendships that Fern builds across the length of the film are all the more fragile for this. They're as seasonal as the labor.

For all the majesty and naturalistic realism of its imagery, *Nomadland* is nevertheless full of sublime, uncanny details that lift it somewhat above the fray: Fern's camper driving through the tight walls of a mountain tunnel; butterflies alighting on a mirror as she washes her face; Fern, nude, floating in a pool of water. These aren't elevating, ironic details – they don't (or shouldn't) make us feel "better" about Fern's situation by reminding us that, to invoke a memorable misfire on this subject, life is beautiful.

In fact, one of the prevailing questions of this film – one of the things that catapults it above mere liberal experiment – is the question of choice. At one point, we meet Fern's family and learn that she'd distanced herself from them long before the economic collapse that left her stranded (in their eyes). "You left a big hole by leaving," her sister tells her. A man she meets and remeets over the seasons, David (David Strathairn), becomes something of a new anchor for her. There's possibility brewing between them.



McDormand and Strathairn share a meal.

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor

But he, too, has a choice to make. He, too, has a family willing to take him in. But will he be taken in? Will Fern?

Giving us this lifestyle primarily as a choice might run counter to the overwhelming sense of economic despair that leaves a great many people choiceless and, in terms of politics, voiceless. In *Nomadland*, however, that choice comes off as welcome complication. The people of this film are united and collaborative in this life; they are also individuals who have their own reasons, their own experiences. If the movie takes any unwelcome short-cuts, it's in somewhat skirting the often brutal working conditions (in jobs like Fern's Amazon CamperForce temp gig) that make something like the choice to live this way – and the predilection to divorce oneself from home and family life as we generally conceive of them – harder to imagine. It would have been exhilarating to see a film as rich as *Nomadland* try. ®



Colman and Hopkins share one last memorable moment together.

MEMORY, LOST

The Father

STARRING
Anthony Hopkins
Olivia Colman

DIRECTED BY
Florian Zeller

★★☆☆☆

OLIVIA COLMAN and Anthony Hopkins are dependably interesting actors. *The Father* – directed by Florian Zeller, bringing his 2012 play to the screen – fails them both. Hopkins plays an aging, cultured man whose mind is slowly starting to deteriorate. The story has us experience this from his perspective: memory slips, identity mix-ups, confluences of time and place. Eventually, different actors sub in as family members (Colman, Olivia Williams, Rufus Sewell), reality blurs, things fall apart, and the center cannot hold. This must have been something to see on stage, where the confusions of the man's mind might have proved more disorienting and provocative. But the film suffers under the weight of its conceit, coming off less as an act of perspectival sympathy than as a trick being played on the audience. The Oscar reels will sizzle. The movie does not. K.A.C.



Pfeiffer faces disaster with a stiff drink.

PARIS WHEN IT FIZZLES

French Exit

STARRING
Michelle Pfeiffer
Lucas Hedges

DIRECTED BY
Azazel Jacobs

★★★☆☆

A MANHATTAN widow (Michelle Pfeiffer) on the verge of going dead broke decides to go out with a bang by taking her college-age son (Lucas Hedges) on one last cruise to Paris. When she runs out of money, her plan is to shuffle off this mortal coil in a blaze of martini-swilling glory. Azazel Jacobs' droll comedy of manners provides a meaty role for Pfeiffer, who gives us exactly what we want – all the brash countenance of a woman playing at an aristocracy that's no longer hers, within a movie that, with all its surrealist touches (see: a dead husband reincarnated into a cat; a psychic who can communicate with the feline), gives the star room to play. And yet *French Exit* is an all-too-frequently lifeless affair; even with writer Patrick DeWitt adapting his own novel, something vital gets lost in translation. Rather than sharp-witted ennui, we get a dose of enervation. K.A.C.











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➔ JUSTIN TOWNES EARLE

[Cont. from 22] "The... advantage Justin has is he can't fucking do anything else," his father told the *Nashville Scene* in 2008. "So he knows he better make it work." Performing at an intimate record-store gig in 2010, Justin was interrupted by a phone ringing at the side of the stage. When he looked up, his father was answering a call from his wife. "We'll just wait till he's done," Justin joked to the crowd.

"Everything Justin ever learned, he learned from his dad," says Wilkins. As time went by, Justin often seemed to empathize with his father. "I can't really blame him all that much," Justin said of Steve in 2012. "I'm turning out to be more like him than I ever thought I would."

BY THE TIME Earle released his first album, in 2008, he was 26 and enjoying the first sustained period of sobriety of his adult life. He slowly built a rabid fan base playing several hundred shows a year as an acoustic duo with his former Swindlers bandmate Cory Younts. The two logged tens of thousands of miles in a Ford pickup. Spending so much time together led to tension; Younts remembers the time they pulled over to the side of a highway in Arizona, stepped outside the car, "swung at each other for a while," got back in, and kept driving.

When he wasn't swinging his fists at his bandmates, Earle endeared himself to those in his orbit, rehashing larger-than-life tall tales about his past: how he was regularly smoking weed by age 11; the time he said a polite hello to Andy Griffith in a hotel lobby, to which Griffith replied, "Fuck you, son." "He had a canon of stories and jokes that sort of explained himself," says tourmate Samantha Crain. "It was like, 'I want you to know so much where I'm coming from.' He really just wanted to connect with people." Earle's one-liners were an art form: "He once told me I was so skinny that I could hang glide on a Dorito," says Mayfield. "It was impossible not to be smiling or laughing when you're around him."

Earle dished out worldly knowledge on everything from the wonders of LSD to what constitutes authentic Mexican cooking to where to find the best roadside antique shops. "Justin would tell these fantastical stories, and after the session I'd go home and Google what he said and I'd be like, 'Holy shit, he's right,'" says Mike Mogis, who produced one of Earle's albums. "It'd sound like bullshit coming out of his mouth, but it's not."

Sometimes, it was bullshit. Jenn Marie laughs recalling the time Earle, who played soccer as a child, tried to explain to her friend, a professional soccer player, about the intricacies of the sport. "That happened all the time," she says. "He really did study everything. He would stay up so late at night, reading books and watching interviews."

Earle's former agent Andrew Colvin remembers going tubing with Earle on the Gulf Coast. "I have a vivid memory of Justin on that tube, tattoos all over him, smiling as big as a human can smile," he says. At the same time, Earle's congeniality may have served as a useful way to avoid sharing his private thoughts. "We spent every day together for three years," says bandmate Bryn Davies. "On one hand, I felt like he would give me the shirt off his back. On the other hand, I never had any idea what he was thinking."

Earle relished mentoring younger artists, giving advice that often seemed like it was intended for himself as much as anyone else. When teenage singer-

songwriter Sammy Brue joined Earle for his first national tour, Earle gave him regular lectures on drugs. "He rammed it in my head that I shouldn't touch this stuff," says Brue. "He wanted to protect me."

Earle was often exceedingly generous. He would give his opening acts and bandmates extra cash while on tour. When Earle heard one of his former opening acts, Jonny Fritz, had lost a favorite shirt, originally purchased at a Virginia gas station, Earle tracked down the identical shirt for Fritz.

That sense of loyalty helped place Earle at the center of a quickly growing roots-music revival based in East Nashville. When Earle recorded *Harlem River Blues*, everyone from Jason Isbell to Old Crow Medicine Show's Ketch Secor to up-and-coming songwriters like Caitlin Rose showed up to play or sing on the record. "He was my hero," says Rose. "I remember getting into Justin's [first] records and thinking, 'I didn't know that people could still do this.'"

Written during a period of relative sobriety, *Harlem River Blues* added gospel, R&B, and soul textures to Earle's fast-improving songwriting. It proved to be his breakthrough, though Earle seemed to sabotage its rollout. Two days after its release, he was arrested in Indianapolis and charged with battery, public intoxication, and resisting law enforcement after trashing a dressing room and allegedly hitting the club owner's daughter. (Earle denied the charges, which were eventually dropped.)

Within 10 days of releasing the album, Earle was back in rehab, postponing the most high-profile tour of his career. *Harlem River Blues* nonetheless became his biggest-selling record, leading to surging Bonnaroo crowds and *Letterman* appearances. "Between the lineage and the name and his fashion and the bad-boy reputation, Justin had the makings of someone where you think, 'If everything works out, this guy could be a fucking icon,'" says Justin Eshak, his manager from 2010 to 2012. "He reminded me a lot of Amy Winehouse, in a weird way... I thought, 'This is a guy who could be on posters on people's walls.'"

After yet another rehab stint, Earle was prescribed Suboxone, a drug given to patients fending off opioid addictions. By the time he appeared on *Letterman* for the second time, in February 2012, he looked and sounded like a different singer than the one who'd appeared on the show just one year earlier: "Mama, I'm hurting," he sing-shouted, "in the worst way."

Around this time, Earle burned many of his closest personal and professional connections. Longtime bandmates like Younts and Davies had stopped touring with Earle, causing the singer to lash out, as he often did when he felt he was being abandoned. When his ex-girlfriend Lauren Spratlin signed on to tour-manage Jason Isbell after breaking up with Earle in 2013, the singer erupted at both her and Isbell.

But that same year, he began dating Jenn Marie Maynard, a teenage acquaintance he reconnected with at a show in her hometown of Salt Lake City. Earle was smitten with Jenn Marie, a former athlete who owned a yoga studio and was almost as tall and lanky as him. "I'm over the moon about her," Justin's friend and former Swindler Andy Moore recalls Earle telling him at the time. "And want to know the best part? I don't have to bend down to kiss her." In October 2013, Justin and Jenn got married — just the two of them and an officiant — in blue jeans in the woods above Lake Tahoe. "To see a grown man just sobbing in happiness, it was really special," says Jenn Marie.

At the time, Earle's career was at a crossroads. He recorded a double album, but ended up

releasing the material as two separate records: *Single Mothers* and *Absent Fathers*. Both received notably less attention than his previous few albums.

Meanwhile, Justin and Jenn Marie were getting tired of Nashville, the only city in the world where a moderately well-known singer-songwriter with the last name “Earle” might get stopped everywhere he went. “He was so sick of being Justin Townes Earle,” says Jenn Marie. The couple moved to a remote area on the Northern California coast, which Earle described as “a town of skittish hillbillies that all grow marijuana.” At first, Earle seemed to thrive out West. In California, he devoured books on the Civil War and spent his mornings walking the couple’s dog on the rocky beach and gathering rusted objects that had washed ashore to display in the yard.

Jenn Marie grew accustomed to Earle’s eccentric habits. He spent his time in the green room before shows transfixed by full-game replays of the 1967 World Series. “There would be blunts everywhere, and he’d be pacing around the room watching this game that he’s seen 100 times,” says Jenn Marie.

Earle still electrified crowds, but offstage, he was struggling with various mental-health problems. Jenn Marie is reticent to go into detail but wants the world to know that as much as Earle’s addictions tended to be romanticized, his day-to-day existence, sober or not, was often full of deep, unglamorous suffering. “A lot of famous people who are charismatic and handsome and stylish and talented, they struggle with mental illness, too,” says Jenn Marie. “I wish people knew how much he did struggle with what they couldn’t see, and what he didn’t write about.”

Earle had long been prescribed medication to help with mental-health issues (“He was on medication morning, noon, and night,” says Jenn Marie). But he had trouble stabilizing his treatment, cycling through doctors on the road who gave differing diagnoses and often prescribed medication over the phone. In California, Earle stopped taking Suboxone. “That was around the time his other addictions started coming back,” says Jenn Marie. Earle smoked medical-grade weed, and according to Jenn, he’d often be “high from the time you wake up until you go to sleep. That’s how he functioned.”

A few years later, Earle would tell Jenn Marie that their seemingly idyllic tenure in California had actually been a particularly isolating period. He was removed from old friends and struggled to write songs without the din of city life. “He was always going to feel lonely, to some degree, even when he was surrounded [by love],” says Jenn Marie. “He was really attracted to the stories and damage of things, and he didn’t write happy songs. There’s a certain level of staying in a deep, more depressed state of mental health if you are constantly only surrounding yourself with stories and shows and thoughts that are dark and deep. He wasn’t really giving himself a chance to be surrounded by positivity. He didn’t open the door, fully, to that. It was just cracked.”

On the West Coast, old friends had a hard time reaching Earle. “He’s probably lost 30 iPhones in the past 10 years,” says Wilkins. When Omaha-based musician Mike Mogis was enlisted to produce 2017’s *Kids in the Street*, he tried calling Earle 10 times before finally getting him on the phone. Before one of those scheduled calls, Earle informed Mogis he couldn’t speak because he was at Chicago’s Wrigley Field, watching his favorite team, the Cubs, play in the World Series.

When Earle made it to Omaha to record, he learned he was going to become a father. He imme-

diately called his own dad. The prospects of fatherhood loomed large for Justin, who would later ponder aloud, before his daughter, Etta, was born, that if she ever wanted to become an artist of any sort, she could drop her “Earle” surname and go by her first and middle names if she preferred.

Once Etta was born, Earle was overjoyed. “Etta says bye-bye in the sweetest little voice,” he wrote on Instagram when his daughter was a year old. By then, Justin and Jenn Marie had relocated to Portland, Oregon. “It was so not the person people want to think he was,” says Andy Moore. “He was over the fucking moon about [Jenn], over the fucking moon about the baby. There is a well-adjusted Justin that I know to have had some of the deepest and most heartfelt conversations, where we talked about the shortcomings of our own families and our paternal lines: ‘How are we going to be better than this?’”

Becoming a dad helped Justin feel closer to his own father. “We’ve been talking more lately, it’s kinda weird,” Steve told Justin on Steve’s SiriusXM show shortly before Etta was born. “You started calling me all of a sudden in the last few months.”

But even as he grew closer to his father, Justin still battled feelings of inferiority. In the last few years of his life, he confided to his guitarist Paul Niehaus that, because his own songwriting was so personal, he thought his father, who alternated between autobiography and literary character sketches, was the superior songwriter.

Now in his mid-to-late thirties, Earle admitted to those closest to him that he wasn’t yet ready to fully deal with his deeper struggles. “He said to me a couple of years ago that his demons were snipping at his heels, and he was ready to face it,” says Jenn Marie. “But that immediately came with him deciding that he wasn’t ready to face it.”

Earle often disguised his most revealing moments in old-time blues and honky-tonk styles that made it seem like he couldn’t possibly be singing about himself. But on the very last song of *The Saint of Lost Causes*, the introspective country confessional “Talking to Myself,” he was as blunt as he’d ever be: “I’m in a lot of pain and I need some help/I don’t dare tell nobody else.”

“It’s really sad thinking about that being his last album,” Bobetsky, Earle’s former manager, says through tears, “because the writing’s on the wall.”

In Nashville, during his final eight months, Justin spent more time than he had in ages with his mother, Carol Ann, with whom he remained close. Earle had helped buy her a house earlier in his career. “She was always just worried about him, and loved him to death,” says Welch.

Jenn Marie and Etta, whom Justin had taken to calling Etta-belle, visited Justin on several occasions throughout 2020. The last time the family was together, a few days before Justin’s death, Jenn and Justin revisited their favorite antique shops and took Etta to parks Justin had played in as a child, including his sentimental favorite: Nashville’s Dragon Park, named for its sea-serpent sculpture, where Earle played soccer as a kid. When, at the end of their trip, Jenn Marie and Etta got into their car to go to the airport, they rolled down the windows. Justin screamed, “I love you,” at them, and they screamed it back.

“Fucking heartbreaking,” Jenn Marie says, thinking back on that moment. “I wish I could’ve just grabbed him and said, ‘You’re coming home. Fuck business. Fuck convenience.’ But he wouldn’t have come, anyway. He would’ve figured out some kind of excuse to be alone, because he was like that.”

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➔ DEMOCRATS

[Cont. from 28] ers, or better yet, for all workers, he should build an entire campaign around that proposal and take that campaign to Florida, Arizona, North Carolina, and Georgia, barnstorming the states and putting surrogates on radio, TV, and online. And then when Biden succeeds, Rocha says, he should go back to those same states and show the people what he accomplished.

“Barack Obama was horrible at spiking the football,” Rocha says. “We have to be more like Donald Trump: ‘Me, I, I did this, my government.’” He adds, “All of us Democrats love to clutch our pearls and say, ‘Ah! We couldn’t do that.’ That’s why we fucking lose.”

Remember Your Roots

ON THE NIGHT of the 2020 election, Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.), a potential 2024 presidential contender, tweeted that the Republican Party was “a working-class party now. That’s the future.” Hawley’s analysis relied on early election returns that showed strong turnout for Trump among not only the white working class but also working-class voters of color in places like Florida and Texas. Hawley’s tweet triggered another round of hand-wringing about how the Democratic Party had lost touch with working- and middle-class voters, and how Donald Trump had cracked the code for how Republicans could appeal to the masses and not just the GOP’s usual constituency of boat owners and country-club members.

We saw this same narrative in 2016; it was wrong then, and it’s wrong now. For four elections in a row, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Joe Biden have all won majorities of voters with incomes of less than \$50,000 a year, according to exit polls. In 2020, Biden not only won voters who make under \$50,000 a year but also handily won voters who earned between \$50,000 and \$99,999, according to exit polls by Edison Research.


There is no mass exodus of working-class voters from the Democratic Party. Political experts say this is partly due to the fact that “working class” is too often thought to mean “white working class,” which couldn’t be further from the truth. The working class is wildly diverse in this country, made up of black, Hispanic, and other communities of color, and many in those communities clearly see little for them in a Republican agenda focused on corporate tax cuts and preserving white supremacy.

All that being said, there should be alarm bells going off at DNC headquarters. Despite Biden’s success among working- and middle-class voters, he was not the candidate of choice for those who said the economy mattered most. Indeed, there’s an argument to be made that if Trump hadn’t bungled the response to the Covid-19 pandemic and handed Biden his most potent campaign issue, Trump would have won re-election without breaking a sweat. If the 2020 election taught us anything, it’s that the Democratic Party has the support of working people, but it must now show that it’s deserving of that support. And to do that, the party needs to exhume its populist DNA.

The Democratic Party has been most successful when it took on the wealthy and the powerful, bust-

ing trusts, breaking up monopolies, empowering workers. The party drifted from those roots in the 1980s as it sought to find a path out of the wilderness of the Reagan years. The path it chose was to act like the Republican-lite Party, courting big corporations for financial support, passing racist criminal-justice measures, and trimming the social safety net.

We’re far enough from the Eighties and Nineties for many in today’s Democratic Party to see how ill-advised those Republican-lite policies were, and how far the party of the New Deal and the Great Society had strayed. You can hear echoes of FDR and Lyndon Johnson in the platforms and policies of Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez, and Warren, a return to the belief that the fundamental axis in American politics is whether you want to take on powerful corporate interests or not.

If the Democratic Party has any hope of re-establishing itself as the party known for making people’s lives better and taking the fight to the powerful forces in our country, it needs to elevate the fight for working people over the lure of bipartisanship with the Republican Party. Bipartisanship rings hollow when you don’t have a job or health insurance or money to feed your family. An economic populism that recognizes our country’s diversity but also the commonality that everyone wants a better life is, was, and always will be the Democratic Party’s best hope. Anything else only portends the rise of the next Trump-like demagogue, if it isn’t Trump himself. “I think populist without progressive is what gets us Donald Trump,” says Hildreth of RuralOrganizing.org. “But I think progressive without populist is also what gets us Donald Trump.” 

➔ NEIL PEART

[Cont. from 55] (A report after his death that Peart was confined to a wheelchair and unable to speak was entirely false, friends said.) He kept up his routine of heading to his man cave each weekday, and saw friends there, even throwing himself a final birthday party in the fall of 2019. When Peart could no longer drive, his friends Michael Mosbach and Juan Lopez drove him there. Peart kept his schedule until just a couple of weeks before his death.

Peart never played drums again after Rush’s final show. But there was a drum kit in his house. It belonged to Olivia, who was taking lessons and seriously pursuing the instrument. Peart’s parents had allowed him to set up his drums in their living room, and he did the same for Olivia. It said everything about Peart that his daughter wasn’t shy about tackling the instrument in the shadow of his own achievements. “Neil immediately said, ‘She has it,’” says Nuttall. “She did inherit what he had. And of course, that thrilled him. . . . He made a huge effort not to make her feel intimidated by him – he didn’t sit there and stare at her having her lesson. He would be out of sight, but he’d be listening.”

WITH PEART’S PASSING closely followed by a global catastrophe, it’s been a dark and surreal year for his friends and family. In a world frozen in place, it’s been hard to process grief. “It feels like it wasn’t very long ago,” says Lee. There was more drama in the Rush camp, too. Lifeson became terribly ill in March, and was hospitalized for a few days and placed on oxygen. He

tested negative for Covid-19 but positive for the flu, though he did lose his sense of taste and smell while he was sick. Lifeson has since fully recovered.

A planned private Toronto memorial for Peart had to be called off, but there was a small dinner with the band and friends in Los Angeles, and a formal memorial there hosted by his widow weeks later. “Carrie picked a beautiful place overlooking the Pacific,” says Perry. “It was a beautiful afternoon. It was a healing time for everyone. Carrie put together a wonderful slide show of pictures, going right back to when he was a boy.”

Some of Peart’s friends – Scannell, Perry, Copeland, prose collaborator Kevin Anderson – spoke in front of an audience that included his bandmates and other famous drummers: Taylor Hawkins of Foo Fighters, the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ Chad Smith, Tool’s Danny Carey. In Copeland’s speech, he noted that thanks to Peart, all of the drummers in attendance shared the indignity of meeting fans who’d tell them, “You’re my second-favorite drummer!”

At the end, Olivia Peart, age 11, got up and talked about her dad. “She was wonderful,” Perry says. “She’s really Neil’s daughter, a really smart little girl.”


Olivia and her mother are, of course, still struggling with the loss, compounded by pandemic-era isolation. The Canadian border has been largely closed for months, separating them from Peart’s extended family. “Our lives were turned upside down when Neil died,” says Nuttall. “And then eight weeks later we were alone at home together, and it’s been tough. . . . We both think about him every single day, and talk about him every single day, and miss him every day.” Through it all, Olivia is continuing her drum lessons.

Since Peart’s passing, Lee and Lifeson have found little interest in picking up their instruments. “I love playing, and I never, ever wanted to stop,” says Lifeson, during an emotional joint video call with Lee. Lifeson was in his studio, where nearly a dozen gleaming guitars hung behind him. “And I thought, you know, ‘One day, when I’m just sitting around shitting my pants, I’ll still want to play guitar.’ And that’s kind of gone now. After he died, it just didn’t seem important, or I just didn’t care about it. But I think it’ll come back.”

“For the longest time,” says Lee, “I didn’t have any heart to play. . . . I still feel there’s music in me and there’s music in Big Al, but there’s no hurry to do any of that.”

Even as they mourn their friend, Lee and Lifeson are adjusting to the idea that Rush, too, is gone. “That’s finished, right? That’s over,” Lee says. “I still am very proud of what we did. I don’t know what I will do again in music. And I’m sure Al doesn’t, whether it’s together, apart, or whatever. But the music of Rush is always part of us. And I would never hesitate to play one of those songs in the right context. But at the same time, you have to give respect to what the three of us with Neil did together.”

After the final Rush show, Peart stuck around the venue, instead of bolting off on his motorcycle. He was, for once, having a great time backstage. “He was ebullient,” Lee says. Neil Peart had finished his work, held on to his standards, never betrayed his 16-year-old self. He was still playing at his peak.

“He felt like it was a job well done,” says Scannell, who hung out with him that night. “And who could deny that?” 

➔ HIGHWAY TO HELL

[Cont. from 69] THE TALIBAN'S CHOKEHOLD on Highway 1 is putting further strain on an economy already depressed by decades of war and the Covid-19 pandemic. Ali Ahmad, a potbellied driver waiting roadside at the Kabul gate to have his cargo of potatoes inspected one afternoon, remembers driving the road 22 years ago during the Taliban days, when it was nothing but a dirt track. It was "rough but secure," he says. "You could sleep next to the road, no problem." The U.S.-built highway was better, but security grew worse each year. "Now, it's back to the same it was before: full of danger, bombs everywhere," he adds. "There are bombs right here!" Indeed, that morning, a Taliban car bomb had crashed into the Afghan army checkpoint and killed several officers, stalling Ahmad's journey indefinitely.

Ahmad says the combination of bad roads, excessive stoppages, and fighting en route had turned a two-day trip into six days and counting. In the past, this had caused vegetable cargo to rot, at a loss of even more money. "Pakistan and Iran have stronger economies because they built a good road system," he says. "We are struggling to survive." As dusk falls, gunfire starts to ring out in the background.

Since taking office, Mayor Ghafari has pushed hard to project a presence in Maidan Shar: renovations to the market center, better road maintenance, and a "Clean City, Green City" anti-trash campaign. But creeping insecurity is confining her to government-in-a-box. "Sometimes I feel like I am living between two rooms: my office and my home," she tells me. The last time she went out into the street to stop an illegal construction project, she got a call from a senior government official warning her not to leave the office again. After firing several subordinates in October for corruption, she received death threats. Then came another assassination attempt – this time on Highway 1. Three men dressed in army uniforms opened fire on her car as it sped away.

Several weeks later, her father, an Afghan army colonel and lifelong inspiration, was gunned down in front of his home in Kabul. "He was a superhero soldier who served his country for 36 years," she says. Though no one has claimed responsibility, Ghafari believes the Taliban killed him to punish her. "They tried two times to kill me, but they failed, so they found a different way to hurt me," she says.

The loss has shaken her like nothing before. Without her father, she says, she would have been unable to endure all the constant threats and sense of betrayal she felt after the U.S. made a deal with the Taliban that had no guarantees for the rights of women. "They want to shut me down," she says, "but they can't silence me. I love my job – being on the front line, fighting for women's rights, making people believe in our power and our presence," she goes on. "I'm risking my life, every drop of my blood, for my country and my people." No matter what happens with the Taliban, "we will not go back."

UNLIKE THE AFGHAN ARMY, the Taliban have agreed to receive us in their Wardak stronghold, the Tangi Valley. The promise of safe passage makes the trip only slightly less nerve-racking than previous drives. We pass an Afghan-army convoy that appears to have just emerged from a gunfight, its windows shattered. A soldier manning one of the turret guns is soaked in sweat. He throws me a fierce glare.

We pass Kohdamani's sprawling base and turn east into the valley. Remnants of old concrete blast walls remind us that not long ago U.S. troops fought hard to purge the Taliban from the area. In 2011, Tangi was the site of the deadliest attack endured by U.S. forces in the war, when a pair of Chinook helicopters were shot down, killing 38 people aboard, including 17 Navy SEALs. Within months of handing the outpost over to the Afghan army, it was abandoned altogether. Today, Taliban control is total.

Winding through low-slung adobe warrens and thick apple orchards, we pull into a derelict village called Qala Amir, where men are shoveling mud after a flash flood. No women are in sight. A Taliban minder clutching a walkie-talkie greets us and says we're free to talk to anybody. Locals are understandably tight-lipped and on message, praising the Taliban for protecting their women and Quran while blaming U.S. forces for killing loved ones and leaving no improvements. "There was fighting every day," says a shopkeeper named Talib Jan, who says his son was crippled by an explosion. "The U.S. did nothing for us, other than build this road, absolutely nothing."

The Taliban commander, named Tawakul, arrives with a detail of gunmen. He says he fought for years to purge U.S. and Afghan forces from the valley, but it looks like his guerrilla days are behind him. Fat, with a reddish beard and a gold watch, he says his men are able to move more freely since the peace pact with the U.S., though a drone struck the day before in a nearby valley. We sit down in the shade of an apple grove, and, flanked by fighters with long permed hair and kohl-ringed eyes, he boasts rapid-fire about the Taliban's growing strength in Wardak. "The Islamic Emirate of the Taliban now control the Kabul-Kandahar highway. Before, there were checkpoints every kilometer, but these have been cleared," he says. "Our mines are very effective – every night at least 10 or 20 soldiers are killed." His math was inflated, but the gist of what he says is true.

The commander was unapologetic about the rising violence. Government forces are "infidels" who deserve to be killed for not accepting an Islamic system, he asserts. I counter that a lot of civilians were dying as well, and that the Taliban are the main culprit. He insists the Taliban do not kill civilians "at all." I list some recent examples and he grows defensive. "The government and the U.S. do these things on purpose to blame the Taliban," he says.

When I ask about the future of women's rights if the Taliban come to power, he says Islamic scholars would set policy and strict Sharia law would be restored. Pressed on whether women would be allowed in government, he snaps: "If Sharia does not allow it, neither will we."

I tell him there's a debate in the U.S. between those who think U.S. forces should stay in Afghanistan to manage counterterrorism operations and those who say it's time to leave for good. "As long as they are here, we will fight them until our blood runs dry – 10, 20, 1,000 years – we'll never get tired of fighting," he says. "Russia was defeated here. They should not have come. The reason the U.S. lost is because they did not learn from them. So we humiliated and defeated them."

To make his point, Tawakul takes us up to the site of the former U.S. Army outpost, COP Tangi. A few concrete blast walls are all that remain on the dust-blown plateau. "The Americans did their best here," the commander says. "But all their best efforts failed. So you have to question their ability. This was what the so-called superpower was able to accomplish."

More than an hour after leaving the Taliban in Tangi, the skies are an ashen gray as we near the Kabul gates. *Whoomp*. Up on a promontory to our left, a rocket crashes into an Afghan army outpost: The Taliban are attacking again. When we reach the main checkpoint, soldiers are scrambling to assist their besieged comrades. A streak of Humvees rips away, roof gunners cocking their .50-caliber machine guns. We jump out, hoping to catch a ride to the fight. Three officers cut us off, in a wild-eyed fury. "[The Taliban] are killing our brothers," one shouts at our translator, "and you bring foreigners to watch." I step back, thinking he might throw a punch. "All of you – get the hell out of here right now!" Reluctantly, we get back in our car and drive on to Kabul, the gun battle fading behind us.

THE BLOODSHED is not likely to end anytime soon. Intra-Afghan talks are faltering, and the Taliban are gaining on the battlefield. Some Afghans cling to the hope that the Biden administration will follow a more conditions-based approach to U.S. withdrawal. Biden has promised to end America's "forever wars" and was against Obama's surge, but U.N. and Afghan officials say the Taliban actively maintain their alliance with Al Qaeda, in violation of the peace deal. Without an enduring U.S. presence, many predict that talks will collapse and that the country could once again plunge into chaos, as it did when the Soviet army departed. "If we see a total disengagement of the international community, the naturally ensuing result will be a state of civil war," says Davood Moradian, the director of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies. The Taliban, he says, would be just one of many warring factions. "We have already seen this reality in Libya, Syria, and Yemen."

On our last trip to Maidan Shar, we join Stanikzai and his men at their upper post, overlooking Highway 1. The previous evening, another police outpost inside the city was overrun by the Taliban. Five officers died in a hail of gunfire, and everyone is on edge. "We are like prisoners here – we must guard our positions until dawn," says the captain. The sun dips behind the purple mountains across the valley, and the insurgent chatter picks up on the radio. One by one, headlights from Taliban motorbikes begin trickling down into the valley. It's not long before bursts of gunfire crackle in the darkness. The captain is chain-smoking, worried his post will be next.

Just before midnight, a group of patrol officers crashes our camp with a surprise morale boost: a Soviet-made DShK heavy machine gun, the kind of fuck-off weapon that makes a would-be attacker think twice. "We bought this gun with our own money," says Omidullah, the ranking officer, with a mix of pride and sadness. "The government gives us nothing," Stanikzai affirms.

The gun is set on a tripod and an officer blasts a volley of deafening, belt-fed rounds in the direction of the motorbikes: a gesture more akin to chest-thumping than targeting the enemy in earnest.

"This outpost is our responsibility," Omidullah says. "Beyond this point the government is powerless." He still has shrapnel in his leg from a bomb blast a week prior. It happened on the highway, a few hundred meters from our position, one of four IEDs he has survived. "The Taliban stole our youth, our bodies, everything," he says. "Even with peace they'll still be our enemy." After a long pause, he adds, "After peace, we'll fight them on our own." ®

Additional reporting by ANDREW QUILTY

Nancy Sinatra

The singer-actor on Elvis, Black Lives Matter, and what her father taught her

What's your earliest memory of performing?

Probably when I was 18. I did the *Ed Sullivan Show*. And I did a Shirley Temple song in a big straw hat. I wore overalls. My hair was very dark brunette. It was just awful. It was live TV, in front of millions of people. I must have been out of my mind.

Sinatra's 'Start Walkin' 1965-1976' two-LP compilation is out now.

How did you wind up making music that was so far away from that — these really cool, moody, psychedelic songs?

I call the early recordings "Nancy Nice Lady." Those records were produced by Tutti Camarata, who was the guy who produced Annette Funicello's records. My Nancy Nice Lady records sold enough to keep me on the label. And then when they were no longer selling, the label was gonna drop me. [They] said, "You know what? We're gonna put you with Lee Hazlewood."

He changed everything for me. He pretended to be this country shitkicker, know-nothing kind of guy, but he was highly educated. An Army veteran. A very worldly person who knew what he was doing. He used to do what he called the "dumb sound" for my records. Dumb meaning uncomplicated. It consisted mainly of rhythm section, the drummer, the bass, three guitars all kind of chugging along.

And it created a whole different thing for me.

He wrote "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'."

He was originally planning to sing it, right?

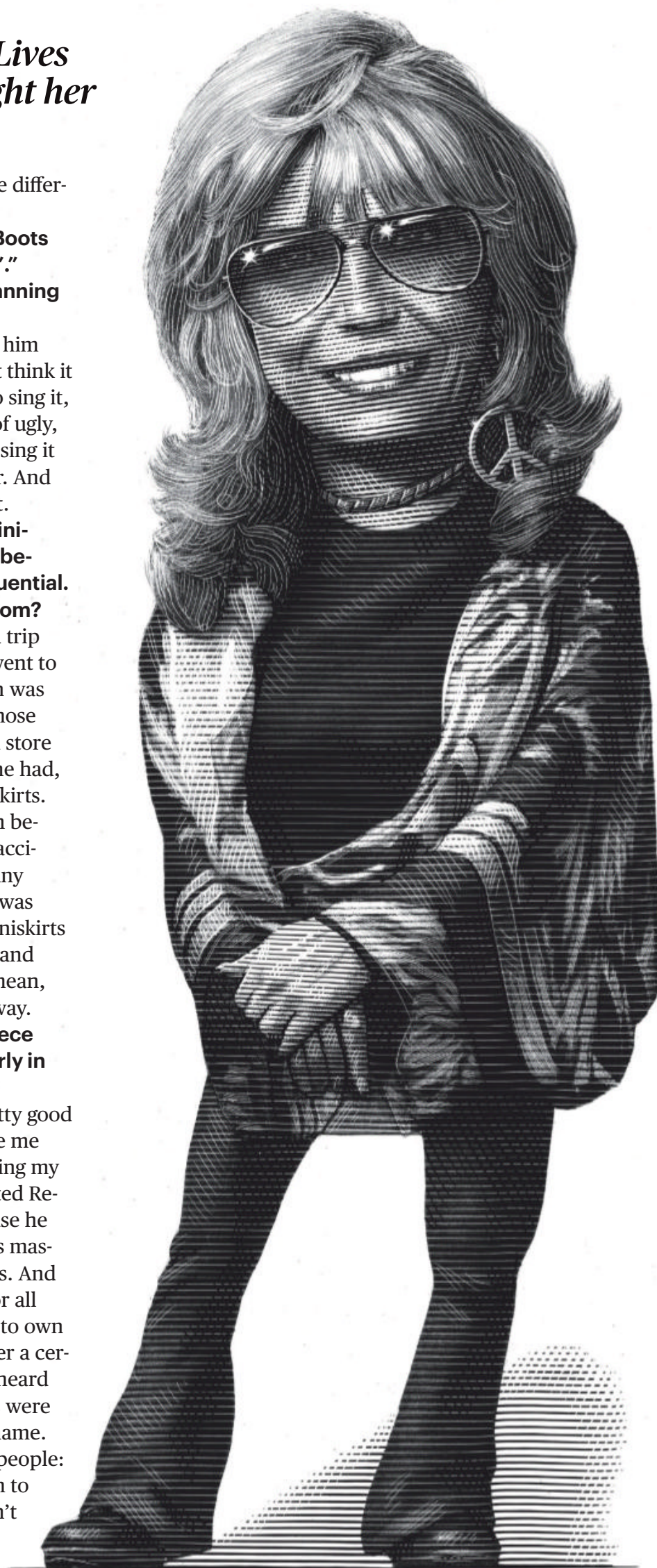
That's true. I just told him the truth: that I didn't think it was good for a man to sing it, that it sounded kind of ugly, and that a girl should sing it and it would be better. And he realized I was right.

Your style, with mini-skirts and sweaters, became extremely influential. Where did it come from?

The look came from a trip I made to London. I went to Carnaby Street, which was the place to shop in those days. And there was a store called Mary Quant. She had, for me, the first miniskirts. I had never seen them before.... But it was an accident. I guess if I had any good instinct at all, it was about the fact that miniskirts would be a smash hit and would last forever. I mean, they've never gone away.

What's the best piece of advice you got early in your career?

Well, my dad was pretty good at advice. And he gave me the advice about owning my own masters. He started Reprise, his label, because he was unable to own his masters at Capitol Records. And he made it possible for all the artists on Reprise to own their own masters after a certain period of time. I heard Taylor Swift's masters were sold again. That's a shame. I would say to young people: Don't despair, hold on to your dreams, and don't let anybody else own them.



You acted with Elvis in 1968's *Speedway*. What was that like?

We were like brother and sister. Priscilla was pregnant when we were making the movie, and I gave her a baby shower. He called me the night Lisa Marie was born. And he said he felt that she was so blessed, but that he felt bad that the babies born in the ghetto were not as blessed. He was a very thoughtful, sensitive person.

What did you learn from your father from watching him perform every night?

He was a genius. He enjoyed it. He made the audience feel at home. The biggest thing I learned was consistency. He was meticulous about how he dressed. His shoes were always spotless. He was so professional.

You've always been politically outspoken. How did you become an activist?

Anger, I think. I just get so mad.... In the Sixties, the Vietnam War was gearing up, and it affected everybody in my life. You had to take a side. I think people are as passionate now as they were in the Sixties. The Black Lives Matter movement is fabulous.... And it's cleansing, because people have to have their voices heard, or you go nuts. If you can't express your feelings and if you can't be heard, how awful is that?

What did you think when Lana Del Rey said she wants to be a "gangster Nancy Sinatra"?

She's a sweetheart. I haven't met her, but she gave me such a gift by saying what she said, putting my stuff back out there. **PATRICK DOYLE**

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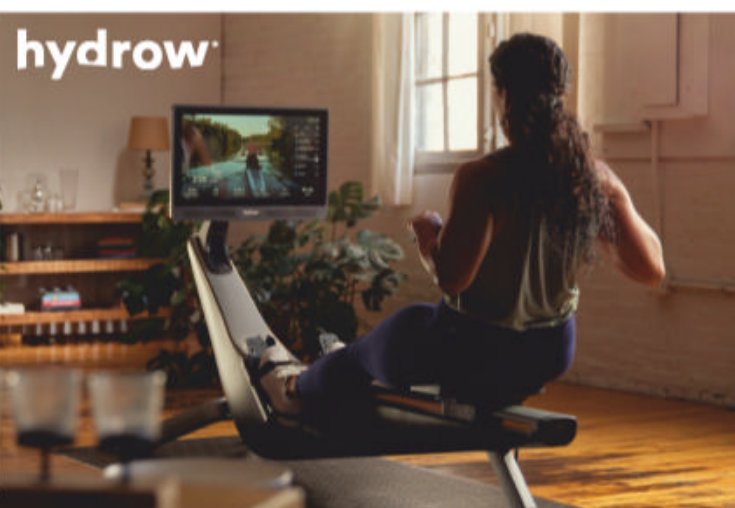


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